Meaning, Order, and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake

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Abstract

My dissertation studies the cultural responses of Chinese society to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Based on Geertz's idea of "webs of significance" and Giddens' idea of "ontological security," I construe "culture" as a system of meaning and order by which the individual and society could maintain sense of security, control, and continuity. A catastrophic event might challenge or threaten this system, and create an "unsettled time" (Swidler) that poses problems to solve, difficulties to confront, as well as opportunities of reshaping moral order and power relation. My is to uncover the variation of meaning-making among different social agents; as well as the relationship between meaning-making on the one hand, and social action, agency, and practice on the other hand.

The data gathered from multiple sources suggests that the Chinese society responded to the earthquake by mobilizing huge institutional, cultural, and material resources, which altogether created a "culture boom." I focus on the existential issues triggered by the disaster, including decisions about life and death, the meaning-making about the disaster, and the meaning-making about life and death. On these topics, I dialogue with literature of culture and action, literature of suffering and theodicy, and the sociology of death. I provide a systematic picture about the diverse responses of Chinese society to those issues. I also look at the linkage between existential issues and social actions in daily life. Several structural, institutional factors and cultural resources are found involved in these topics. However, there is also a huge room of ambivalence and uncertainty.

Keywords: Disaster, Suffering, Meaning-making, Theodicy, Sichuan earthquake

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Chapter One

General Overview: Meaning, Order, and Disaster

The Sichuan Earthquake occurred on May 12th, 2008. 68,712 people died and 374,643 people were injured.[1] The epicenter was in Wenchuan County, with a magnitude of 8.0 on the Richter scale. The extent of seriously damaged areas reached 100,000 square kilometers.[2] The earthquake is often referred to as "Wenchuan earthquake" in China. However, many other districts, especially Beichuan County and Mianzhu City, were also severely damaged. During the last five years, the government and the general public have devoted huge efforts not only to economic and material reconstruction, but also to mental and cultural recovery as well.

The responses of Chinese society to the earthquake, and subsequent actions of aid and reconstruction, have attracted the attention of scholars in social sciences in different ways. They have been especially concerned with issues of public participation and state-society relations. For instance, Xu (2011, 2013, 2014) examines the expression and practice of moral sentiment by the public in the wake of the earthquake, such as donation, volunteering, and mourning. He finds that these practices are crucially interfered with or constrained by state-society interaction: "Righteous anger was suppressed by the state; solidarity was colonized by the state and the market for political and commercial purposes; compassions in NGOs and small groups were limited by institutional barriers and their own weaknesses (2011:3-4)." In an authoritarian system, the political structure has a strong impact on citizens' public participation. Hence the fate of these practices of

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[1] This statistic was announced by the State Council Information Office and distributed by the Sina news network on September 25th, 2008: http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-09-25/183514499939s.shtml
[2] Announced by China Seismological Bureau: http://english.gov.cn/2008-05/18/content_981724.htm

moral sentiment, beyond short-term collective effervescence, is fragile and weak.

Lin (2012) conducted a study comparing the post-disaster reconstruction of 5.12 Sichuan earthquake and 9.21 Jiji earthquake in Taiwan (that happened in 1999), focusing on the influence of state-society relationship and information transparency on the local reconstruction process. In Sichuan, policy making and planning of reconstruction is strongly dominated by the state's political and economic power. The authoritarian regime controls the major portion of available resources, and tends to force the local survivors to accept the reconstruction plan, while it represses the resource mobilization of civil society. It causes conflict and distrust between the government and society, enlarged social inequality, and difficulty of monitoring corruption.

Teets (2009) evaluates the emergence of Chinese civil society (non-governmental and non-profit organizations) after the earthquake. She argues that the participation in post-earthquake relief and reconstruction has strengthened civil society, though new and weak, by means of increased capacity, publicity, and interaction with local government. However, civil society groups still have much to learn and improve, such as professional skill, the trust between them and local people, and greater institutionalization of their social roles and legal status.

These works pay attention to issues like moral sentiment, civil society and state-society relation. They provide rich background knowledge about the structural factors through which different social actors connect and interact with each other. However, Xu's and Teets' works do not look at the local survivors but rather at the bystanders (NGOs, volunteers, audiences) who either give sympathy or provide support to survivors. Lin's work examines the relationship between the state and local people in terms of political

economy, paying less attention to the role of culture.

My work attempts to complement theirs with a different approach, focusing on the problem of "meaning": that is, the specific cultural "contents" by which the local survivors perceive and make sense of their situations, their lives and future. "Meaning" and "significance" are key terms often used in the sociological conceptualization of culture. Weber construed culture as "a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance (1949:81)."[3] This points out a dichotomy between a meaningless world and meaningful human culture. "Meaning" is not a natural, essential being but is imposed by humans onto the world. Later on, in Geertz's discussion of culture and "thick description," he claimed: "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be…an interpretive [science] in search of meaning (Geertz 1973:5)."[4] However, the concepts of "webs of significance" and "meaning system" are often too vague and broad, covering almost all aspects of human life. I focus specifically on the most basic and fundamental part of it, that is, the existential assumptions about how reality works, and the value system that defines what is important, what is good and evil. They provide principles and guidelines for people to perceive, think, and act in the life world; and sustain what Giddens (1991, 1984) calls "ontological security."

Based on these assumptions about culture and social life, I construe that culture is a system of meaning and order by which the individual and society could maintain sense of security, control, and continuity. A catastrophic event might challenge or threaten this

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[3] Its German text is: "'Kultur' ist ein vom Standpunkt des Menschen aus mit Sinn und Bedeutung bedachter endlicher Ausschnitt aus der sinnlosen Unendlichkeit des Weltgeschehens."
[4] However, Geertz did not provide any citation from Weber's original work.

meaning system, such as the case of the Sichuan earthquake. It not only caused serious damage to human lives and properties, but also impacted social fabrics and the normal functioning of everyday life in the effected zones. It created an "unsettled time" (Swidler 1986, 2001) which posed questions to answer, problems to solve, difficulties to confront, as well as opportunities of reshaping moral order and power relation. The local and larger society mobilized huge amount of material, human, and cultural resources to (re)gain control over, and rebuild meaning upon the world, and *upon human beings*, in various dimensions. I call this huge mobilization of cultural resource as a "culture boom," in which various kinds of cultural contents were used or created to respond to problems caused by the disaster. The goal of my dissertation is to uncover the variation, tension, and ambivalence of the effort of meaning/order-making among different social agents, as well as the relationship between meaning/order-making on the one hand, and social position, social action, and daily practice on the other hand.

I. Literature review

In the following pages, I review groups of literature relevant to my work. They all share a common concern of meaning and order, surrounding the situations of disaster, suffering, and trauma. The literatures are: **(1) Cultural sociology**: At first, I discuss theoretical questions about the nature of culture, and its relation to action and daily life. I present different models proposed by contemporary scholars, and then see how culture could respond to disastrous events. **(2) Suffering and death**: I summarize literatures in sociology, anthropology, and humanities that contemplate on how human society deals with suffering and death in general. Discourses of "theodicy" and "sociodicy" introduced

in this literature are examples of cultural resources capable of making account of suffering. **(2) Sociology of disaster**: I look at studies on vulnerability, post-disaster responses and reconstruction, as well as reflections on the nature of disaster. I especially emphasize on the responsibility of human society, which echoes the agenda of "sociodicy." **(4) Trauma and recovery**: At last, I integrate sociological and psychological researches on "trauma," in terms of how the traumatized agent perceives and interprets his misery.

After the literature review, I will introduce the "culture boom" following the Sichuan earthquake. I summarize the responses of Chinese society to the earthquake, including governmental policies, the civil institutions, and cultural industry, and then bring out my own research framework and research methods.

(1) Cultural sociology

Sociology has a long tradition of studying the role of culture in society and social actions. Marx's criticism of "ideology," Durkheim's notion of "collective representation" and Weber's concern with "meaning" all contribute to this issue from different angles. Contemporary scholars continue to provide accounts about how culture is involved with the life world and the practices of social actors. It is no doubt an extremely complicated topic, for "culture" exists in many different forms, from simple codes, schemas to deliberate narratives; and they work in different ways. Second, the strength of "agency" or "reflexivity" also varies. Social actors sometimes adopt cultural codes without thinking, while sometimes they think and talk very much.

Scholars have different view about whether culture is an independent or dependent variable in social life. Marxist scholars tend to see culture as "superstructure" derived

from material condition and class hierarchy, and is manipulated to further the interests of the dominant group. This view is further expanded in Bourdieusian studies on cultural taste. As a counter argument, Alexander and Smith's "strong program" (2003) proposes the relative autonomy and causal power of culture that is able to shape actions and institutions. Their historical study (1993) demonstrates how a set of binary codes was reproduced by different agents in various contingent contexts for more than one century.

However, what does it mean to say culture has causal power? Early Weberian and Parsonian paradigm tended to postulate that the individual's action is guided by belief, value and norms. Later scholars have questioned this thesis. Swidler (1986) rejects the Weberian model of value, and instead construes culture as a "tool kit" or "repertoire" providing resources for constructing "strategies of action;" and human actors as active, skilled "users of culture." She sees culture as a source of means, rather than ends. Now the new question is: What exactly is the motivation of human action? Vaisey (2009) proposes a "dual-process model" based on survey data on moral judgment. He differentiates "practical" consciousness and "discursive" consciousness. The former is deeply internalized schema that motivates the subjects' actions, though they are often unconscious. The former is capable of *post hoc* sense-making, deliberation and justification. The two types of consciousness actually represent two kinds of culture functioning in different ways.

Is Vaisey's model always true? How could it be compatible with theories of "reflexivity" [5]? For instance, the tradition of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology assume the mechanism of reflexivity that enables the individual to take the others'

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[5] Although "reflexivity" is a popular term in academic writing, we need to be cautiously aware that different scholars talk about it in much different theoretical contour.

attitude toward himself and then adjust his behavior (Mead 1934). In modern society, reflexivity is especially crucial to the formation of self. Giddens (1991) observes that the modern individual carries the ever-ceasing task of questioning and shaping his own self-identity, life style, and decision making via reflexivity. At last, Archer (2007) upholds the role of human agency and subjectivity. She argues that "Reflexivity, exercised through internal conversation, is advanced as the process which not only mediates the impact of social forms upon us but also determines our responses to them (p.15)." The subject reflexively perceives and interprets the external conditions, and then decides how to respond, based on certain priorities.

Perhaps these models about human agency all hold true in different aspects of social life. Usually, the cultural resources working in our life situations seem to lie in between two poles; they are flexible and can be put into practice in various ways. Sometimes people just follow or obey traditions, schemas and social norms with little self-awareness. But we do witness moments when people deliberately think and talk about their future and try to solve problems, e.g., career planning, faculty meeting. It is so especially when they encounter crises, social change, or catastrophic event, which can be called "unsettled time" in Swidler's sense (1986, 2001). They struggle to make sense of an uncertain world, and then decide how to respond to it. Such situations call for high degree of "reflexivity."

Culture in the face of disaster

In earlier pages, I proposed the concepts of "meaning-making" and "webs of significance." Now I continue to develop these ideas. I suggest that the "webs of significance" provide a system of meaning, value, knowledge and narratives for individuals and communities to rely on and act in the world. The term "significance" has

two aspects. The first is simply "meaning," e.g., the meaning of a gesture, a symbol, or a word. The second is "importance," concerned with value or desirability. These two aspects cover the cognitive and the emotional aspects of social life. We not only "know" or "understand" but also have desire for, or emotional attachment to, certain things.[6] None of these meaning systems is essentially constant, absolute and "real;" they are more or less social and psychological projections or constructions. The world in itself is neutral and meaningless, as Weber already mentioned (1949); it is human beings who spun the webs of significance to keep themselves from falling into the dark, null, meaningless abyss.

The term "webs of significance" is often quoted but never clearly defined. My project only focuses on the most basic and fundamental beliefs and values people hold about the world and themselves. Many scholars already summarized some of them. In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Giddens discusses the "existential questions" which "concern basic parameters of human life, and are 'answered' by everyone who 'goes on' in the contexts of social activity (p.55)." They are basic aspects of life, including: existence and being; finitude and human life; the experience of others; the continuity of self identity. In our daily life, our "natural attitude," often unconsciously, brackets them out and takes them for granted as unproblematic. We have faith in the stability and predictability of the "being" of ourselves and the world. In this way, we gain and maintain an "ontological security," a sense of safety or anchoring. However, chaos or accidents occurring in our routine life might call everything into question. Such anomalous circumstances, just like

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[6] This dichotomy corresponds to the distinction between "is" and "ought" in the tradition of philosophy. Psychologists also provided a similar dichotomy. Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997) point out the distinction between *meaning as comprehensibility* and *meaning as significance*. The former concerns with whether something makes sense, whether it fits with certain rules or theories. The latter regards whether something is of value or worth.

Garfinkelian breaching experiments, force us to discover and question the legitimacy of the existential assumptions we habitually take for granted. This chaos causes anxiety and turbulence; it is "not just disorganization, but the loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons (p.37)." This fragility corresponds to the uncertain nature of webs of significance, that what we deem solid and reliable is not inherently and eternally solid as we thought. As I said, the contents of webs of significance are constructed or projected by human society rather than real things. They are liable to threats and damages caused by disaster, violence or simply lack of faith.

Echoing Giddens, Oliver-Smith (2002:38) postulates how human society responds to disaster, in terms of regaining meaning and control:

> In disasters the linkages between concrete material circumstances and ideological structures may be directly observed as people attempt to come to terms, to construct meanings and logics that enable individuals and groups to understand what has happened to them and to develop strategies to gain some degree of control over what is transpiring. The extreme conditions created by disaster occurrence frequently challenge people's worldviews with profound existential questions for which meanings consistent with circumstances must be elaborated.

In his own disaster study, *The Martyred City* (1986), Oliver-Smith suggests that big changes in social life require people to reinterpret tradition in an innovative way while also maintain the continuity of meaning, in order to adapt themselves to new situations. On the other hand, disaster might reveal the existing yet hidden fabric of the society, as Hoffman asserts (1999:310):

> Calamity take a people back to their core, and in the rubble remaining, a researcher can behold the fundamental constructs that underpin the social world and, thread by thread, observe the web of the world and worldview as they are spun again. Many aspects of a society and culture are unclothed in the aftermath of a disaster. The workings of kinship, alliances, and institutions come to the fore. The varied dominions of biology, economy, and social practice appear. Groups form and divide. Authority arises and meets contestation. Precepts show their

shape and relevance.

In my dissertation, I will see how these mechanisms are unpacked in the empirical world.

The next literature talks about how human society deals with suffering in general. Works on this topic touches the concepts of "theodicy" and "sociodicy," which are cultural resources capable of coping with suffering, that is, to construct meaning upon, and control over suffering.

(2) Suffering and death

"Suffering" is a broad term referring to any unwanted event or situation, caused by the nature or humankind, such as illness, death, disaster, injustice, warfare, and so on. Throughout history, when facing suffering and disasters, human beings have been struggling with questions like: Why is there suffering? Why me? What is the purpose of it? What should I/we do to avoid it? Many scholars have found that traditional societies tend to connect suffering and death with moral, social, or religious meanings. It enables people to endure or accept suffering in certain ways. For instance, religious discourses of "theodicy" interpret suffering as God's punishment or the consequence of karma, and teaches people to behave well in order to avoid it. These discourses do not completely see suffering as an external object, but rather relate it to human beings ourselves. In this way, suffering becomes a catalyst of social control and moral discipline. However, the progress of rationalization and disenchantment render questions about life and death, transcendence and redemption as "irrational" and shift them into the private sphere. Theodicy thus declined and could not provide the public with a commonly shared, satisfactory account of suffering. Second, due to the economic progress and scientific development in the modern era, the inconsistency and tension between ideal expectations and brutal realities (disease, death, warfare, etc) become intolerably sharp. People do not

know how to explain, endure, and surmount the miseries that have happened to them (Berger 1967; Das 1997; Kleinman 1997; Levinas 1998; Morgan 2002; Morgan and Wilkinson 2001; Olick 2007; Weber 1958c; Weber 1963b).[7] In order to deal with suffering in modern time, especially regarding the responsibility of humankind, Morgan and Wilkinson introduce the term of "sociodicy" (2001), along with Wilkinson's agenda of "critical sociology of suffering" (2005), to urge sociology to uncover the social, political and economic process that generates human suffering.

Among different kinds of suffering, "death" is the most disturbing one. Scholars already found the "sequestration of death" in modern society, that death became a hidden object, a taboo that should not be revealed in public (Mellor 1993; Mellor and Shilling 1993; Walter 1991; Willmott 2000). It is a historical trend marked by social theorists. According to Berger (1967), death "radically challenges all socially objectivated definitions of reality – of the world, of others, and of self (p.43)." In the face of death, human needs a legitimation of the social world, and religion served this need in the past. Bauman (1992) even suggests that it is the sense of mortality that triggered the emergence of human history and culture, which struggled to overcome mortality and seek for immortality. However, the progress of modernity makes things difficult. Giddens (1991) observes that modern society sequestrates existential problems into private sphere. The individual is forced to pursue his self-identity and self-project by his own reflexivity. As Willmott (2000) comments, the individual is alone in fulfilling this task, and is especially weak in dealing with the reality of death, which makes the self-project

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[7] This narrative is abstracted from literatures of sociology, anthropology and humanities which examine the ways people perceive and make sense of suffering in the past and present. These works cover various kinds of suffering, from disease, death, and disaster to atrocity, violence and warfare. We need to be aware of the distinct features of different kinds of suffering.

problematic and meaningless.

However, in non-western societies, one can still find that both religious and non-religious views are used to make accounts of disasters (Adeney-Risakotta 2009; Chester and Duncan 2010; Falk 2010; Kleiman and Kleiman 1997b; Shweder 2008). For instance, Adeney-Risakotta discusses the various ways Indonesian Muslims and Christians confronted with the existential issues caused by the tsunami and earthquake in 2006. People from different backgrounds and situations asked different questions about the disasters and themselves, and answered them differently. The author summarizes the cultural, the religious and the scientific world views, which work as symbolic moral discourses providing resources that help people to face the suffering.

The literature reviewed above indicates "theodicy" as a cultural resource to cope with suffering, which declined in modern western society. Perhaps this narrative does not always fit the empirical reality; though it is not totally wrong, neither. As we shall see in the case study, there were different kinds of suffering discourses in the real world; some of them have rich meaning, some do not. This variety composes a "universe of possible meanings," in which the individual look for accessible meaning systems that might help him to rebuild the life world.

(3) Sociology of disaster

According to Kreps (1984) and Tierney (2007), the sociological research on disaster since the Cold War basically served the needs of government and military leaders, providing information and suggestions for problem solving, policy making and risk management of natural and technological disasters. Although scholars in this area brought in academic paradigms such as symbolic interactionism, system theory and

organizational approach, the practical-oriented nature of their researches made it difficult to make insightful theoretical contributions to mainstream sociology.

Perhaps the concept of "disaster" and the nature of disaster study are both questionable. Constructionist scholars argues that the existence of disaster is not an essential, objective truth; it is rather depending on the public perception and recognition. Different culture or social group might understand a hazardous event differently (Biersack 1999; Oliver-Smith 2002). Hewitt (1983) observes that the dominant social-scientific perspective on disaster was a social construction driven by the priorities of the government, scientists, and technocrats. And the mainstream disaster researches tended serve the interest of institutions concerned with control over nature and society (cited in Tierney 2007).

However, things can be different from another angle. (Clarke 2004) proposes that "Studying disasters is an excellent way to study important things about how and why society works as it does." Just like Garfinkel's ethnomethodology which suggests that we can see the existence, the logic, and the strength of social norms when we violate them. Through the impact of disasters upon human society, and the way the society responds to disasters, we can observe the fundamental principles and mechanisms by which society reproduces and remakes itself through time, such as solidarity, conflict, inequality, symbolic meaning, social change, and so on.

Among various topics of disaster researches, my dissertation is particularly related to those focusing on the causal role of human society in disaster and harm. I summarize three categories here. First, social conflict and inequality is perhaps the most prominent topic in disaster research since it touches a core issue of mainstream sociology. The unequal social structure make powerless people exposed to higher risk and vulnerability

of severe damage, and poorer chance of being saved and aided during and after the disaster. Various studies approach this topic from different angles, including race, class, gender, and age (Bolin 2006; Dyson 2006; Enarson and Fordham 2001; Fothergill 2004; Mitchell at al 2008; Peacock et al 2000; Van Willigen et al 2002). For instance, Klinenberg's study on Chicago heat wave (2002) finds that the problem of poverty made old people of lower class live isolated, having scarce social network. The government also neglected the responsibility of warning and caring this highly vulnerable population, hence caused excessive death.

The second category focuses on the political and economic powers crucial in *both* the causes of and the responses to disasters. As Blaikie et al. (1994) and Kousky and Zeckhauser (2006) had shown, the state and the private enterprises exploit the environment in the pursuit of profit or development, hence worsen the impact of natural disasters upon vulnerable places. Conversely, disasters in turn create opportunities for poli-economic renovation as well. Rozario's historical study (2007) shows that, under the ideology of enlightenment and modernity, disaster was once construed as a "creative destruction" that opens spaces for capitalist production, expansion, progress and social reform. Similarly, Gothem and Greenberg (2008) study the post-disaster rebuilding in New York and New Orleans. The federal state and private corporations controlled the rebuilding projects under neoliberal policy, mainly aiming at profit-seeking and city renewal, while fail to address the needs of lower class victims, hence exacerbate social inequality. Stallings (2002) analyzes the struggle between different status groups and government sectors on the issue of a post-disaster rebuilding. He encourages researchers to give greater voice to victims in order to advance their empowerment. These findings

echo the case of the Sichuan earthquake reviewed in the introduction. Most literature on this topic takes a critical position toward the state and capitalism, though their actual impacts upon the survivors vary by case.

These two groups of literature have double roles. They are not only academic researches, but also (at least implicitly) calls for practical measures or reforms to change the status quo. The reflection and critique on human society, including the unjust social structure, power relation, and cultural construction, echoes the agenda of "sociodicy" reviewed above.

As a contrast, the third category studies ordinary people's social and organizational behavior in response to disastrous events. They generally presented the "pro-social" side of disaster survivors, e.g., acting in line with social norms, having positive concern about social ties, community, and adaptation (Fritz 1961; Johnson, Feinberg and Johnston 1994; Quarantelli and Dynes 1972). These researches, however, took "social norm" in question for granted, while paying inadequate attention to the complexity of moral choice, including the variation, conflict, and dialectic among different moral positions. This gap is what I could contribute in my work.

(4) Trauma and recovery: problem of meaning

1. Sociological views

"Trauma" is a keyword often seen in the context of disaster, atrocity and suffering. A large proportion of post-disaster researches are dedicated to it.[8] This term originated in psychology, and then spread to social sciences and the general public, though its meaning

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[8] Most post-disaster trauma studies are conducted by psychologists and other counseling professionals. They tend to examine the effects of certain explanatory factors upon the survivors' trauma and recovery, such as self-disclosure (Dennis et al 2006), social capital (Nakagawa and Shaw 2004) and relocation (Riad and Norris 1996). On the other hand, anthropology and cultural psychology pay more attention to the survivors' traumatic "narratives" and meaning-making (Jung 2009; Lin 2001).

is ambiguous and diverse. In most literature, trauma is construed as either the *events* that cause certain psychic problems, or those problems themselves as the way people *react* to the events (Erikson 1994; Smelser 2004). Contrarily, Alexander (2004) rejects these naturalistic positions and sees trauma as a *construction*, that trauma is created by human imagination, belief and imposition. And "construction" tends to vary widely across different culture. Bracken (2001) argues that it is the advent of post-modernity in western society that produced the condition, that is, the decline of solid meaning system, in which psychologists develop huge interest in trauma.

According to Schievelbush (1986), Young (1996; 1997) and Fassin and Rechtman (2009), the medical and academic professionals started to notice the phenomenon of "trauma" in the late nineteenth century. They found that some people who experienced catastrophic events suffered from psychic symptoms afterward, including paralysis, numbness, memory problem, sense of helplessness, etc. However, trauma did not gain public recognition and legitimacy until the Holocaust, a huge inhuman atrocity. Since then it became a popular term with serious moral concern, and is applied to various kinds of misery like war, disaster, sex abuse, etc. Holding a constructionist view, Fassin and Rechtman (2009) propose that trauma is produced through "mobilization of mental health professionals and defenders of victims' rights, and more broadly by a restructuring of the cognitive and moral foundations of our societies that define our relationship to misfortune, memory, and subjectivity (p.7)." Mass atrocity and suffering in the twentieth century brought trauma to the public's attention, linking it with the politics of reparation, testimony and proof, calling for empathy and justice (279).[9]

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[9] Traumas caused by different events (war, violence, disaster, technology, etc) have different qualities, and we need to be cautious about exactly what kind of traumatogenic event a given literature is talking about.

Another problem about trauma is its analytical trauma. Erikson's canonic disaster study, *Everything in Its Paths* (1976), distinguished two kinds of trauma (pp.153-4): *Individual trauma* is "a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defense so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it affectively." It actually follows the classical definition shared by psychology. Second, *collective trauma* is "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality." Erikson (1994) further emphasized the role of community and its link with trauma. It is community that offers a cushion for pain, a context for intimacy, and serves as the repository for binding traditions. A disaster might tear apart a community and the social networks that support the individuals. Meanwhile, it may in turn link people with similar fate together, creating a shared identity and spiritual kinship among them. In this way, trauma could create a community.

Erikson's idea of collective trauma echoes Durkheim's ideas *anomie*. It elevates the significance of trauma from the individual level to the societal level. Although it explains the social "form" of trauma very well, it says little about its "content." This is where I make a departure from Erikson's contribution and adopt a Weberian approach, asking: What kind of meaning or narrative is involved in a trauma? What kind of cultural contents exactly does the society provide for trauma victims? How do trauma victims think and act in the social and cultural milieu? In the next section, I integrate literatures in sociology and psychology on the topic of "meaning-making," a larger context that covers both trauma and its recovery. Through this integration, knowledge in different disciplines could work together and provide a fuller understanding about the survivors' condition. On the other hand, facing the task of rebuilding new homes and continuing their lives, the

survivors are involved with activities more complicated than merely responding to the loss and damage caused by the disaster. They need to move on to resume their daily work and plan for the future. These tasks of recovery and reconstruction provide an opportunity for them to reorganize or modify their meaning systems.

2. *Meaning-making and psychological research*

Though trauma involves many physical symptoms, one of its most difficult aspects is "making sense" of misery. That is, the victim struggles with questions like: Why is there a disaster? Why me? What is the purpose of it? In the introduction of this essay, I mentioned the decline of theodicy as a cultural resource that helps the victim's recovery. However, people (even those who are not religious believers) still have other ways to make themselves feel better; and psychologists have already discovered mechanisms by which people cope with traumatic experiences.

Psychology is an enterprise with double roles. Its first role is a "practical" profession that aims to help people cope with mental problems (from a constructionist view, the so-called "problem" and "solution" are both social constructions). Its second role is an academic discipline which conducts research and produces knowledge with scholarly quality. The literature reviewed here are mixture of their theoretical construct and clinical data about trauma. To integrate their researches as a coherent knowledge body, I summarize psychological understandings about trauma into three-stage phases: existential assumption, traumatic experience, and recovery. This outline echoes literatures of sociology and anthropology reviewed above.

The first phase is "existential assumptions." Janoff-Bulman (1992) summarizes three core assumptions people hold about themselves and the world: *Benevolence of the world*;

meaningfulness of the world; and *self-worth*. Similarly, Taylor and Brown (1988) point

out "positive illusions" that most people hold: *unrealistic positive view of self*; *illusions of*

control and *unrealistic optimism*. These illusions over-estimate the controllability of the

world and the prospect of the future. Ironically, they are crucial for sustaining a self-

concept and mental health, and could even inspire people to change and grow.

The common characteristic of the existential questions, assumptions and illusions

reviewed above is that they presume an unrealistic, or unjustified, positive world view. In

normal daily life, this meaning system remains unproblematic and is reinforced by daily

activities and social interaction. However, when it is challenged by devastating events or

intellectual critiquing, there is no ultimate and solid foundation beyond personal faith that

could guarantee its legitimacy with full certainty and confidence. This is the phase of

"traumatic experience."

Psychologists used to focus on the "symptoms" or negative impacts of trauma, and

even created categories of "disorder"[10] to classify them. According to DSM-IV, the

symptoms of "posttraumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) include: intense fear, helplessness,

numbness, flashbacks, obsessive thoughts, avoidance, etc.[11] However, they also find

various forms of coping strategies, recovery, and transformation in the victims. For

instance, Janoff-Bulman (1992; with Frantz, 1997) examine the victims' experiences of

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[10] The language used by psychologists is often questionable in the eyes of social constructionism. I use
quotation marks to remind readers that terms like "symptom," "disorder" or "PTSD" are professional
constructs based on specific ontology and the intention of the disciplines (psychology and psychiatry)
rather than real things. In my writings, I only adopt them as convenient tools of communication, especially
when I borrow psychological theories and findings to build my own research framework.

[11] http://www.mental-health-today.com/ptsd/dsm.htm. DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental
Disorders) is published by American Psychiatric Association. It provides standard criteria to classify
mental disorders. The category of PTSD actually includes many clusters of symptoms; and different
patients might have different kinds of symptoms. Though the concept of PTSD is widely accepted and
applied in psychiatry and psychotherapy, it is often questioned in academia. Many scholars criticize it as
reducing the individual's experiences and contexts into simplistic, homogeneous labels of symptoms (Lin,
2009; Fassin and Rechtman, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2003).

"disillusionment" and changes in fundamental assumptions (reviewed above). The catastrophic events are like threatening "data" that shatter the victim's existing assumptions. And the victims may use the strategy of accommodation or assimilation to reduce the discrepancy between the events and the assumptions. Their logics contrast each other: (1) *Accommodation*: the victim modifies the basic assumptions or worldviews to fit the real event, e.g., one admits that bad thing could happen at any time (Joseph and Linley 2006). (2) *Assimilation*: the victim reinterprets and assigns a meaning to the misery to fit the existing worldview. One way is to "make sense" of it, to find the cause of it or render it as justified. Another way is to find a purpose or a benefit in it[12] (Janoff-Bulman 1992; Davis et al 1998).

The phase of "recover" could be more than finding a way to make sense of the traumatic event; it could be a "growth." Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, 1998, 1995) use the term "post-traumatic growth" (PTG) to label various kinds of positive transformation in the aftermath of trauma, such as: recognition of vulnerability, changed priorities, increased appreciation of life, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, increased sense of personal strength, and a richer existential and spiritual life. They involve changes in both thoughts and behaviors. For instance, some survivors gained heightened awareness of their vulnerability, mortality and fragility of life. And it prompted them to modify their priorities of life, spending more time on intimate relationships, and appreciating daily "small things" (1998:11-13).

The concepts of trauma and transformation are applied in non-western cases as well. Yaw-Sheng Lin studies the survivors of the Jiji earthquake in Taiwan. He adopts a phenomenological and narrative approach to gain deep understanding of how the

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[12] The religious theodicy, mentioned earlier in this essay, belongs to this type of coping strategy.

survivors perceive and interpret their life world. This approach allows us to recognize cultural and individual variations rather than falling into a simplistic, homogenous model. His works single out many themes from the survivors' experiences of trauma, such as the temporality of consciousness (2001), the benefit of articulation and weak tie (with Wu, 2004), and the significance of interpersonal relationships in Chinese culture (2009).

Although we may discover patterns and ideal types from empirical cases, we should bear in mind that none of PTSD, PTG, or meaning-searching occurs in all victims who encounter catastrophic events. Some victims never sink in deep sorrow; some never recover; and most of them experience both. In some cases, people who never bother themselves with it seem to be happier than those who do (Davis et al. 2000). The posttraumatic responses are complicated, ongoing processes, and vary widely from person to person. These facts question the necessity and benefit of meaning-searching. They also implicate the "uncertainty of meaning" I mentioned earlier, that the task of meaning-searching is a hard struggle with no final guarantee.

As a proviso to the issues about meaning-searching and posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi and Calhoun make a rather pragmatic comment (2004:15):

> …trauma survivors often do not see themselves as embarking on searches for meaning or attempts to construct benefits from their experiences. They are either attempting to survive or trying to determine if survival is worthwhile…posttraumatic growth is a consequence of attempts to reestablish some useful, basic cognitive guides for living, rather than a search for meaning or an attempt to manage the terror of mortality.

It suggests that the meaning-making process reviewed above, including disillusionment, rebuilding assumptions and posttraumatic growth, etc, are endeavors not just for making sense of the suffering *per se*, but for moving on with their lives and facing the challenges, difficulties, and opportunities that confront them in the present and future.

Discussion

After reviewing four groups of literature, I would like to synthesize them and extract a general outline underlying their different intellectual origins, languages, terminologies, and problem framing. Students of sociology might find that psychologists confine themselves too much at the "individual" level. It is perhaps not quite absolute. The cognitive schema applied in suffering coping, like accommodation and assimilation, are no different from the logic of theodicy and sociodicy. Also, from a fundamentalist sociological viewpoint, there is no clear fine line between individual and society. Every individual is a product of the social and cultural soil that nurtures him. As Bruner says, the symbolic systems that "individuals used in constructing meaning were systems that were already in place, already 'there,' deeply entrenched in culture and language (1990:11)." And, that "culture" is not a transcendental schema somehow given; its logic "derives rather from the logic or organization of action, from people operating within certain institutional orders, interpreting their situations in order to act coherently within them (Ortner, 1984:130)" It is the whole cultural milieu that provides schemas, repertoires, and narratives for social actors to weave their webs of significance.

On the other hand, some literatures also indicate the relative weakness of modern society in coping with suffering. The progress of disenchantment, the decline of theodicy, the burden of self-project imposed on the individual, altogether force mankind to face the uncertainty of meaning. There is no final or standard answer for the existential questions threatened by overwhelming events. Consequently, how one responds to the threats *varies*. One might keep his/her faith in the preexisting assumptions, or search for new meanings to cope with the threats, or give everything up and fall into a dark abyss of

meaninglessness. From a nihilistic standpoint, the world itself is meaningless and all beliefs about meaningfulness are challengeable and fragile. Second, the uncertainty of meaning opens up a "space of possibility" that allows the individual to look for different kinds of meaning systems that might help him/her to rebuild the life world. It is where the cultural milieu makes the difference.

All literatures are surrounding a basic theme: meaning and order. Human's endeavor of coping with suffering is a struggle to make meaning for suffering, and gain some sort of control upon both the nature and human itself. These tasks of meaning/order-making vary at different social levels, as summarized by the chart below. This typology of variation is the core framework of this dissertation, and will generate specific topics for the following chapters.

Level of social agent	Tasks of meaning/order-making	Social control
Poli-economic power	▪ Administration and manipulation of relief and reconstruction work ▪ Fulfill the political, material, and ideological interests	▪ Downward social control: reaffirm legitimacy, repress critical voices
Community, civil society	▪ Coping with collective trauma ▪ Rebuild social tie and solidarity ▪ Relief and reconstruction	▪ Horizontal social control: affirmation and negotiation of social norms ▪ Upward social control: request for justice and compensation
individual	▪ Coping with individual trauma ▪ Survive the economic hardship ▪ Self control: moral discipline or self blame	▪ Upward social control: request for justice and compensation

At the private or individual level, the victim/survivor needs to cope with individual trauma (if he has it), to confront with the material and emotional suffering, and the existential question about life and death. Suffering coping involves "attribution," that

searches for the cause of suffering, and determine who is responsible for it. The attribution could be led to different directions. The victim might attribute the suffering to his own misdeed or mistake, and thus blame himself and try to change himself. This is a form of self-control.

At the communal level, or the so-called "civil society," they need to cope with collective trauma (in Erikson's sense), to rebuild social ties and solidarity, working together in the tasks of rescue, relief, and reconstruction. In this process of social interaction and cooperation, the social norms can be either reaffirmed, strengthened, or challenged, contested. For instance, whether a victim should only take care of himself, or run the risk of his life to save others, is a difficult moral dilemma, and could provoke controversies in the community. The affirmation and negotiation of social norm can be seen as a horizontal social control.

Both the individual and collective victims might blame certain powerful others, such as the government, or the unjust social structure and institution, for the undue damage. This agenda leads to "sociodicy," seeking for justice, compensation, or even social reform. Contrasting the mechanism of self control mentioned above, this agenda is a form of upward social control. In this context, "trauma" can be "used" to take social and political actions, and make social consequences (Das 2003; Das 2007; Fassin and Rechtman 2009).

The third level is the political and economic power, or more specifically, the government, the capitalists, or any social agent who has the power to manage, administrate, and manipulate the relief and reconstruction work. Literature reviewed above (Gotham and Greenberg 2008; Rozario 2007) indicates that the poli-economic power might take the advantage of disaster to fulfill their political, material, or

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ideological interests, while sacrificing the true needs of survivors. At the same time, facing the questions and complaints coming from survivors and civil society, the ruling power needs to either justify its legitimacy, or to repress the critical voices and maintain a false peace. This is a form of downward social control. Because the ruling power and civil society have differentiated and even conflicting interests, the relationship between them is always full of tension, conflict, negotiation, and compromise.

In the next section, I will introduce background knowledge about Sichuan Province and the research sites of this dissertation. I also describe the "culture boom" emerging in the whole Chinese society in response to the earthquake. It was a mass mobilization of human, material, and cultural resources, undertaken by the government and the civil society. It involved almost all aspects of human culture, including meaning-making, morality, suffering coping, and politics. I will also discuss the role of "meaning purveyor" who carries specific cultural contents to help or guide the disaster survivors to make their lives once again meaningful. At last, I will extract important themes which will be the specific topics in the following chapters of this dissertation. These themes can be mapped out in the typological framework presented above.

II. The case of Sichuan earthquake

After reviewing literature on disaster, trauma, and suffering, I turn to look at the case of Sichuan earthquake. In this section, I introduce (i) background knowledge about the province and the research sites; (ii) the "culture boom" that emerged after the earthquake. At the end, I will make a summary of the research topics of the following chapters.

The province and the research sites

Sichuan Province is located at the southwest of Mainland China, as marked in figure 1. Its name literally means "four rivers." Its area covers 187,000 square miles, with population of 80.8 million people. Its capital is Chengdu City, a major economic and cultural center of the Western China. The major ethnic group living in the province is Han (also the majority of the whole country), which occupies 95 percent of the population. Meanwhile, the Tibetan and Qiang people occupy 1.5 and 0.4 percent of the population. Geographically, it is surrounded by mountainous areas that separate its land and people with the rest of the country; hence it had been relatively independent in the early history. The rich and self-sufficient economy earned the province a title "Kingdom of the Heaven" (*tianfuzhiguo*). Its major industries include agriculture, mining, and high-tech development. The GDP of the province reached 429 billion US dollars in 2013, which is the ninth highest in the country[13].

Fig 1. Location of Sichuan Province in Mainland China[14]

The province has a long history of civilization and culture, and is well-known for its cultural heritages, historical sites, natural landscapes, arts, and cuisine, which altogether

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[13] The statistics in this paragraph can be found on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sichuan
[14] The map is retrieved from China Today website: http://www.chinatoday.com/city/sichuan.htm

contribute to a prosperous tourism industry, attracting visitors from the whole country all the time. Important historical figures who originated from Sichuan includes: the legendary hero Dayu; the dam architect Li Bing; the poet Li Bai; the former state leader Deng Xiaoping, and so on. Sichuanese people are known to be optimistic and hospitable. They enjoy leisure time very much. Their favorite leisure activities are playing mahjong, drinking tea, and chatting.

Fig 2. Map of Sichuan Province[15]

The epicenter of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake was the Longmen Mountain fault line, which covers several counties in Sichuan. For this dissertation, I select two places as the research sites: Hanwang town and Beichuan county capital. They are under the administration of Deyang City and Mianyang City, respectively (Both cities are shown in figure 2). Before the earthquake, the two towns were both quite prosperous. Hanwang had 58 thousand residents. Its economy was supported by a state-operated business,

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[15] The map is retrieved from China Highlights website: http://www.chinahighlights.com/sichuan/map.htm

Dongfang Turbine Corporation (DTC), along with other factories and mines. It was claimed to be among the one hundred strongest towns in Sichuan Province. Meanwhile, the Beichuan county capital is the economic and political centre of the county, having thirty to forty thousand residents. The county as a whole is a rural and mountainous area; it is also a homeland of a minority ethnic group, the Qiang (羌).

The earthquake ruined most buildings in the two towns, killing almost five thousand people in Hanwang[16] and more than half of the population in Beichuan county capital[17]. They were among the most seriously damaged sites in the whole earthquake area. The state preserved the relic of the two towns, assigning them as "relic parks," along with newly-built earthquake museums, opened for public tourism and mourning. At the same time, the state also built new towns on new sites to accommodate the remained survivors.

The stories of the two towns and people living there will be further discussed in Chapter Three, in terms of their vulnerability and resilience to the disaster.

Cultural boom: A nation-wide mobilization of cultural resources and practices

In response to the Sichuan earthquake, the whole Chinese society mobilized huge amount of resources in the relief work and reconstruction.[18] This "boom" was an extraordinary phenomenon in which one can examine social mechanisms rarely seen in normal time. In this section, I present four categories of cultural "platform": The state's planning of reconstruction, the influx of volunteers and NGOs, the application of psychological intervention, and flourishing discourses in the public sphere. In this huge

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[16] The number is quoted from an interview with the town's governmental official.

[17] There is no official report of the death toll of Beichuan county capitol. The survivors' estimations range from 10,000 people to two third of the population.

[18] The word "boom" is borrowed from Yang's term of "memory boom" (2005). He studies the flourishing discourses about the Cultural Revolution during the 1990's. He explains the boom by three factors: resistance to earlier repression, rising cultural industry and entrepreneurs, and current social discontents.

flood of social mobilization, different kinds of social agents take actions, express opinions or emotions regarding to the disaster. These cultural practices and texts generated by the meaning purveyors are what I call "culture boom."

(1) The state's reconstruction plan

The central government took the full charge of the administration of relief work and reconstruction following the disaster. In order to effectively mobilize resources and facilitate the aiding work in the wide damaged area, the government adopted the system of "counterpart aiding" (*duikou yuanjian*). It recruited rich provinces and cities around the country to aid corresponding counties in Sichuan. Under this plan, certain aiding province was in charge of one damaged county; and certain aiding city was in charge of one damaged town.[19] The aiding provinces and cities invested monetary, material, and human resources to almost all kinds of relief and reconstruction work, including commodity supply, public service, constructing new towns and buildings, and so on. For instance, Jiangsu Province, a rich province at the east coast area, was in charge of aiding Mianzhu City, a seriously damaged area in Sichuan. Up to the beginning of year 2010, the Jiangsu government affirmed to invest 1,010 million RMB[20] to the aiding work, and had completed the construction of 63 schools, 26 hospitals, 25 bridges, and 240 miles of roads (Zhou 2010).

Second, the government not only provided material support, but also made plans of cultural reconstruction, e.g., to cultivate and promote certain cultures to improve the economic and mental well-being of people living in the earthquake zones. For instance, the Beichuan County has been working on a project to promote Qiang culture (a minority

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[19] General Office of the State Council, Document [2008] No.53, "Notification of the Distribution of Counterpart Aiding Plan for the Wenchuan Earthquake Post-Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction."
[20] The ratio of Chinese currency (RMB) to U.S. dollar is approximately 1:6.

ethnic culture), educating local people and developing a "cultural tourism" as a promising way to earn their living. This effort echoes Oliver-Smith's thesis that people stricken by disaster "reinterpret tradition in an innovative way while also maintain the continuity of meaning" (mentioned earlier).

The post-disaster relief and reconstruction were not only practical, material works, but also an ideological tool. The party-state, the pro-party media and scholars claimed the reconstruction work, particularly the design and execution of counterpart aiding, as an expression of the "socialism with Chinese characteristics," and was more successful and superior than post-disaster responses in other countries, such as Haiti and the United States (Gao and Wang 2010; Wei 2008). However, critical studies consider the reconstruction work dominated by the state as an authoritarian imposition that repressed the mobilization of civil society, and worsen the problem of social inequality (Lin 2012).

(2) Volunteers and NGOs

Soon after the Sichuan earthquake, the media broadcasted images and information of the impacted areas to nationwide audiences. This information flow in turn provoked a huge wave of volunteers[21] and NGOs pouring into Sichuan to offer help and support. It was an expression of sympathy for "distant suffering" in the modern era (Boltanski 1999; Clark 2007; Xu 2009). This trend was regarded as the emergence of "civil society" in China, which has long been weak under the authoritarian regime (Teets 2009).

The origin, membership, and function of NGOs working in Sichuan are extremely diverse. Some of them were created solely by voluntary laypersons; some were administrated by the government (so-called "CONGO"); some were well-established

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[21] There is no official and reliable estimate of the actual number of volunteers who went to Sichuan after the earthquake. A news report (Yan 2008) published on May 14th, 2008 suggested that there were 10 million volunteers. But it did not identify the data source.

domestic or international NGOs. The services they offered range from material supply, house construction, career support, emotional support, community service, social work, and so on (Zhu, Wang and Hu 2009). Scholars found that the NGOs flourishing after the earthquake did respond to the needs and problems in the disaster zones quickly; and their service could fill the gap which the government could not cover (Roney 2011). However, the government monopolized the reconstruction planning and most monetary resource, and at the same time posed many regulations on NGOs. Hence the latter's development and service was limited (Huang, Zhou and Wei 2011).

During my fieldwork, I also visited many NGOs that went to Sichuan shortly after the earthquake, participating in the rescue and relief work. Some are still there now, and have established long-term relationships with local people. They accompanied the survivors, giving help and consolation through the most difficult time. As time went by, the NGOs gradually moved their focus from material support and trauma healing to some normal social functions, such as counseling for adolescents, caring for aged people, educational activities, environmental protection, and other community services.

A special category of NGO is religious organizations, or so-called "faith-based organizations." It provided multiple support ranging from material supply to spiritual and emotional consolation. As a cultural repertoire existing along the history, religion provides explanations of the cause of disasters by discourses of "theodicy." It also helps believers to recover from sorrow and despair caused by huge loss.

(3) Psychological intervention

Shortly after the earthquake, the government actively urged experts and workers in psychology, psychiatry, and mental health to offer support for survivors in need.

Countless professional and amateur workers came to the sites to provide services of psychological intervention, including psychological assessments, diagnoses, counseling, and therapy. They also produced countless research papers on academic journals. In 2009, the Beichuan County government established an official mental health center, which was the first and only one such institution set in the governmental sectors. Its function is to administrate and coordinate the mental health work in hospitals, schools, and communities in the county. However, as a product of modern western science, psychology has not been widely understood and accepted by Chinese people. The mental health workers need to make adjustment or innovations to promote their services. For instance, they makes use of cultural resources more friendly to local people, like arts, dancing, sports, and social events like summer camps, and community activities.[22]

Psychologists from different background introduced various healing methods to help survivors in need (Deng 2012; Shen 2009; Wang 2011; Xiao and Chen 2011a; Zhang and Zhang 2009). The most interesting case is probably the *Wucaishi* (colorful stone) writing partner program organized by Xiao, a professor in Sichuan University. Xiao adopted the theory of "post-traumatic growth" (reviewed above) and "narrative therapy" which encourages the clients to tell their stories to release emotions and gain insights about their experiences. In order to help large amount of people in need, she made a bold organizational innovation – to conduct psychological interventions with amateur resources in a large open population, rather than formal counseling taken in a closed room. (Xiao and Chen 2011a). I will talk about this case in Chapter Four.

Although psychological intervention did make contribution to the mental health of

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[22] Beichuan Qiang Autonomous County Mental Health Service Center. 2011. *Starting from Heart, We Walk Together*.

local people (if we accept the face value of their survey data), there were problems and limits as well. First, voluntary counselors with insufficient training might confused the survivors and even worsen their mental problems. Also, many research teams, one by one, went to the disaster zones to conduct surveys with local survivors. They left soon after the survey without doing any help. It became an annoying disturbance to the survivors (Shen 2009; Xiao and Chen 2011a). Second, very often the survivors' problems were too difficult that even a professional therapist could hardly do any help. At this moment, the only thing is to accompany the survivor and let time cures the wound (Jia, Huang and Liang 2012).

Nevertheless, the influx of outside supporters into Sichuan, including reconstruction staffs and teams, volunteers, NGOs, counselors, and so on, brought to local people rich opportunity of face-to-face interaction with outsiders, which was rare in their normal life before the earthquake. Many local people I interviewed reported that they gained lot of care and inspiration from those outside supporters.

(4) Discourses in public sphere

In response to the earthquake, the public sphere of Chinese society produced huge amount of discourses in academia, culture industry, and internet forums. For instance, one can check the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) online database which gathered entries of academic and professional journal articles published in China. From May 12th, 2008 to October 31st, 2013, there are 40,496 entries with the term "Wenchuan" in the title; and 8,121 entries with "Beichuan" in the title. These works came from various disciplines, from geology, economics, public services, disaster measures, to social sciences, psychology, journalism, and humanities. As for book

publications, one can search the Amazon.cn website. There are 382 entries with the term "Wenchuan" in the book title. These results do not include those works talk about the earthquake but did not use the term "Wenchuan" in the title.

These scholarly and layperson publications cover a huge variety of topics. It is impossible to make a complete list, and I can only name some major categories directly related to my work. The first group is first-hand witness, reportage, and memoirs written by survivors, rescuers, journalists, and outside supporters. These writings include plain description of actual events as well as emotional reactions (Beichuan High School 2009; China Central Television 2009; Feng 2010; Li 2008). Second, professional writings about reconstruction, NGO, and psychological intervention (reviewed above) also contributed a significant portion of literature. They bring delicate understandings, analyses, and comments about the issues in question. Besides realistic documents and scholarly researches, a group of survivors and outside audiences created artistic works, e.g., poems, songs, theaters, etc, to express their emotion and imagination about the disaster, the dead, and the nation (Huang 2008; Huang 2011; Qi 2009).

Humanitarian concern was another prominent topic for cultural elites. Some scholars connected Chinese history, traditional philosophy, and moral virtues with the post-disaster relief and reconstruction. They worshiped spirits of "Great Love" (*da'ai*), sacrifice, gratitude, patriotism, and so on (Chen 2009; Tan 2010; Ye 2009). Existential questions about life and death were not absent. For instance, (Zheng 2010) suggests that religious wisdom, like concepts of nirvana and redemption, might help people "gain deep understanding about 'life' and 'death,' bringing huge consolation to the bereaved (p.283)"

Internet forum is a convenient public platform for ordinary people to express opinions. Unlike formal publications, online discourses are capable of making quick, on-time reports, complaints, interactions, and debates. Since the earthquake till now, countless debates have been made on all kinds of problem: bad quality of construction, political corruption and injustice, issues about resettlements, discontent about low compensation, and so on. Although these debates probably would never gain sufficient feedback from the authority, they were above all attempts to seek for justice and moral order. They are signs of an emerging and growing public sphere in Chinese society, which can not be completely regulated and manipulated by the state.

The role of meaning purveyor

In the cultural platforms and culture boom reviewed above, one can identify several kinds of social agents who produced cultural practices and texts to help the local survivors to cope with suffering and reestablish a meaningful life. I call them "meaning-purveyor," including the government, the volunteers and NGOs, the profession of psychology, and various kinds of cultural elites or opinion leaders. They select and introduce to the survivors certain cultural contents from the cultural milieu, that is, the pool of cultural resources (e.g., schemas, discourses, narratives) distributed in the social space. As Swidler (1986) puts it, the accessibility of cultural resources and skills of using those resources are unevenly distributed. The meaning purveyors tend to have more (and more professional) channels to use or create cultural contents. However, the local survivors still have their own ways (rich or poor) to access and use cultural resources. My research will examine the effects of these different channels of cultural resources upon survivors' meaning-making and strategies of action.

Research themes: Meaning/order-making in Chinese society about the disaster

The aim of this dissertation is to uncover the meaning/order-making in Chinese society following the Sichuan earthquake. It was a "culture boom" generated by the multiple platforms listed above. In the earlier section, I propose a framework of the social distribution of meaning/order-making. I will apply this framework in the context of Chinese society, and generate specific topics of the following chapters.

Trauma recovery at the individual and communal level is the basic issue that confronted with the survived town citizens. And it was embedded in and shaped by the government's resettlement policy. The survivors lost their old homelands and moved to new towns, starting to lead a new life, no matter satisfied or not. They need to cope with what they lost, and look to the future. It is depicted in Chapter Three.

Problem of theodicy and sociodicy concerns with how people construe the cause and meaning of disaster are. It can be directed to self control and moral discipline, or upward/downward social control between the poli-economic power and the civil society. The latter caused a political tension in which different social agents had different versions of theodicy/sociodicy. It is examined in Chapter Four.

The existential question of life and death has two different dimensions. The first is the moral decision or willingness to survive or die. It was a moral struggle that brought about debates and concerns in the public sphere. The second is the ontological reflection on life and death. It is a far more esoteric topic in ordinary life; however, the earthquake created a chance for people think about it. I devote Chapter Two and Six to talk about them.

As presented above, many outside institutional forces entered the disaster zone to offer assistance, including the government, the volunteers and NGOs, and psychological

intervention. Their influence will be discussed in some chapters. The meaning-making process is not solely the local survivors' own business but a collaboration and negotiation between different social agents in the field. However, how and to what extent the individual survivors receive outside help and messages vary greatly. As an attempt to study one specific meaning purveyor, I devote Chapter Five to examine and compare different types of religious organizations, regarding the material, emotional, and spiritual aids they offered.

I will introduce the specific topics and organization of each chapter later. Before that, I need to summarize the research methods used in this work.

III. Research method

Based on the research framework presented above, I conduct fieldwork in two earthquake sites, aiming to examine the survivors' meaning/order-making embedded in the conditions and situations in their real lives, as well as their interaction with the meaning purveyors. I attempt to look at whether and how the survivors' meaning system varies among the social space. Now I introduce my research methods in four parts: data collection, sampling, and comparison.

Data collection and research method

I use multiple research methods to gather data for this dissertation. In different chapters, I give more weight to different data source, depending on the specific context and background of the topic.

(1) Content analysis

I look at published/printed texts from various kinds of social agents. The first category

is "survivor literature," namely, the survivors' first person perspective, including memories on experiences of confronting the disaster, participating in relief work, and stories about post-disaster resettlement and reconstruction. The second category is published and unpublished/internal documents of the organizations which contributed efforts on relief and reconstruction, including NGOs, academia, and the government. I focus on what kinds of support they offered to the survivors, and how the latter received their support. The third category is bystanders' literature, typically produced by writers or scholars around the whole country who were concerned with the disaster.

The texts seen in publications, media, and internet cover a broad range of topic. This source complements with my own fieldwork (noted below) in many ways. First, at the early stage of data collection, published texts may provide useful information about what is out there and what issues are worth exploring. Second, some social agents are hardly accessible in the field due to psychological and political sensitivity, such as teenaged students, governmental staffers, and anyone who does not want to be interviewed. However, there are rich published contents produced by them or written about them. Third, once the researcher collects data about the same topic from both published texts and fieldwork, he can compare those data and see if/how data from different sources differ in their contents.

 (2) Participant observation

It is a method trying to get close to and even join the subjects and their activities in real life. Through immersion into the life world of the subjects, the researcher documents "those moments when belief and action come together (Luker 2008:167)" and gains first-hand knowledge about "how people grapple with uncertainty and confusion, how

meanings emerge through talk and collective action, how understandings and interpretations change over time (Emerson et al 1995:4)." The reason I adopted this method for my work is to examine how "meaning" is embedded, expressed and practiced in real life. As asserted earlier, the meaning-making process is not a pure symbolic nexus in the individual's mind; it is embedded in real-life situations, practices and interactions.

I conducted field work in Sichuan for totally ten months from 2011 to 2013. In the beginning, I visited six different places (Chenjiaba, New Beichuan, Luoshui, Hongbai, Hanwang, and Xiangyang) to conduct a pilot study. Then I chose Hanwang town and New Beichuan as the major sites, and spent four months in each of them. I observe local people's daily activities, interactions and conversations, as well as the interaction between local survivors and meaning purveyors.

Participant observation and in-depth interview (noted below) complement each other. They cover similar issues about social life, though in different ways.

(3) In-depth interview

Unlike participant observation, an interview is a kind of communication taken in a very formal and serious way. It is a carefully designed form of information exchange, composed of questions and answers between the researcher and the informants. Luker (2008:167) suggests that interviews are "narratives,"[23] stories about what the informant "*thinks* happened, or thinks *should have* happened, or even *wanted* to have happened, as postmodernists claim." [24] It indicates that the spoken information articulated in an interview should not be taken as "truth" in a strict or positivist sense. Rather, it is the subject's interpretation or construction of the reality and his/her self, imbued with certain

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[23] Of course, "narrative" exists not only in the form of interviews. It can emerge through written words, internal conversation, and voluntary speech not evoked by an interviewer.
[24] The italic font in the quote is emphasized by the original author.

intention, motivation and expectation.

Interview about traumatic experiences involve with another issue: secondary harm vs. healing and articulation. It is widely believed that talking about personal trauma runs the risk of hurting the victim again, hence is a problem of research ethics (Oliver-Smith 1979). [25] However, many other literatures suggest that talking about experiences of suffering or trauma does have some therapeutic effect, that the victims can release their emotion and gain outside recognition through the process of narration and articulation (Lin and Wu 2004; Wilkinson 2005). Psychologists also found that developing narratives about one's trauma and life, either through talking or writing, does have therapeutic benefits for recovery (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004, 1995; Pennebaker 1993).

In my study, I do not focus solely on the victims' traumatic past, but give more weight to the way they think about their life world in general. It thus reduces the risk of secondary harm, and provides them a chance to build a narrative about their past, present and future. I design my interview schedule (Appendix 2) as a linear narrative with seven sections: (1) life before the earthquake, (2) experience about the earthquake and subsequent resettlement, (3) Change of Social network and social relation, (4) Current situation, priorities, and concerns. (5) Interactions with volunteers, social workers, and psycho-therapists, (6) Commemoration of the dead, (7) Existential questions about the meaning of disaster, life, and death.

The relationship between different data sources

The data acquired from in-depth interview and participant observation complement each other in many ways. The interview provides a chance for the subject to make up a

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[25] And the IRB reviewing process is particularly cautious about this issue.

coherent and meaningful narrative about him/herself. However, the length and depth of the subject's narrative vary. Some do have much to say while some do not. It is where participant observation serves to make a contribution, for it allows the researcher to gain information about the subjects in a more "natural" form of social life, in which they could feel free to express more opinions and feelings.

The topic of culture and action reviewed earlier involves methodological issue as well. Scholars suggest that discursive data acquired from in-depth interview cannot predict the respondent's actual actions. Vaisey (2009) argues that the individual's action is determined by unconscious cultural schema. Jerolmack and Khan (2014) emphasize on the importance of lived experience and social context in which one acts. Following this these, participant observation is helpful since the researcher can gain more information from more people, that altogether represent multiple perspectives about specific events and people themselves.

However, One should not deny the value of in-depth interview too soon. Although in-depth interviews have many problems, it is still a worthwhile method for my study. First, as Pugh (2013) puts it, in-depth interview bring about four kinds of information: the honorable, the schematic, the visceral, and meta-feelings. The interpretive analysis of interview data could reveal the individual's "emotional landscape that brings a broader, social dimension to individual motivation (p.42)." Second, as reviewed in earlier sections, posttraumatic meaning-making is a mental process highly involved with "reflexivity," "narrative" and "discursive conscious-ness." Interviewing is a good way for the subject to articulate these symbolic nexus. Third, interviews also allow the subject to express something s/he is unable to say in daily life due to external pressure (e.g., from family,

neighbors or colleagues).

In my fieldwork, I acquired data from both in-depth interview and participant observation, and hence was able to see both the respondent's discursive consciousness and daily practices (to some degree), and examine the linkage between them.

Sampling

The sampling in my study is based on the variation of the contextual factors of the survivors' meaning-making, including the life world situation and the intervention of meaning purveyors. There are two levels of sampling in my research. The first is the research sites. I selected two sites, shown in the chart below, and spent four months in each site to conduct the fieldwork research. Both towns are seriously damaged area; yet they differ in some ways. New Beichuan has many different kinds of meaning purveyors working there, while Hanwang does not have a distinct development of cultural tourism and Qiang culture. Instead, it has two NGOs with religious backgrounds; and they do provide subtle religious messages to the survivors. These variations are structural factors that might influence the meaning-making process of the residents. However, individual variations inside each site are more important.

Places	Economy before the earthquake	Place of reconstruction	Meaning purveyors: NGO, psychology, religion	Meaning purveyors: Cultural economy
New Beichuan	Industry, business	Long distance relocation	NGOs, Mental Health Center,	Cultural tourism (Qiang culture),
Hanwang Town	Industry	Short distance relocation	Buddhist-based NGO, Christian-based NGO,	

I conducted in-depth interviews with individual survivors. I recruited interviewees

through personal connections and snow ball sampling. In order to gain sufficient data to represent the variety across different kinds of local survivors, I tried to recruit people from all accessible categories. In sum, I conducted 36 interviews in Hanwang (19 females and 17 males), and 26 interviews in Beichuan (15 females and 11 males). They cover various age groups, education levels, and occupations (see appendix 1: interviewees' basic information; and appendix 2: the interview schedule). Besides formal interview, I also gather informal information in the field through daily activities, chatting, and observation, regarding general town citizens beyond the interviewees.

As for the part of meaning purveyors, I interviewed several NGO members, and few governmental staffs, to gain knowledge about the service and support they offered to the local survivors on the one hand, and how the latter received them on the other.

Comparison

I do a comparison to see how the meaning-making process (approached through the research methods listed above) varies among different people. I look at how the intervention of meaning purveyor, as a contextual factor that offers cultural resources, influences the survivors' meaning-making. However, I do not postulate the relationship between variables as a deterministic causation, i.e., with the meaning-making process as the dependent variable, and the contextual factor as the independent variable. Rather, as I propose in my research framework, their relationship is an interpretive one, that the human subjects perceive and interpret their own situations in a certain way, and then make decisions to handle the daily events. People in similar situations might think and act in different ways, and there is no single, fixed causation between the objective situation and the subjective meaning making.

The comparison looks at the survivors' involvement with the meaning purveyors. People who have rich access to the meaning purveyors naturally have more access to different kinds of cultural resources that might be helpful to them. However, how they receive or interpret those resources will vary. On the contrary, people with poor access to meaning purveyors might basically rely on local culture, personal ties and other kinds of cultural resources.

Through comparison, I try to find out patterns of variation, looking at how the meaning-making process varies by the contextual factor. I will also analyze the survivors' narratives, and sort out major themes that appear to be the core elements of their worldview and action repertoire, in the forms of codes, schema or discourses.

IV. Overview of chapters

Chapter Two deal with choices about Life and Death during and shortly after the earthquake, and the moral discourses involved in them.

The earthquake created extreme situations that forced people to make moral decisions between life and death, in which the individual's might conflict with the social norms. I use published texts and interview data to examine the way people think about, make decision about life and death in the social and cultural milieu. Four types of decision can be found regarding the disastrous situations; and they form two sets of antagonism. The antagonism of "Die for the others vs. Escape for oneself" is linked to that of collectivism and egoism. The second antagonism "Survive for others vs. Die in despair" is a matter of solidarity and meaning.

The data indicates there is no single, commonly shared moral paradigm that dictates

what is right and wrong on the issue of life and death. One can find an orthodox discourse that sanctions altruistic behaviors and blames egoistic ones. However, there are alternative discourses as well, including individualistic discourse, death discourse, therapeutic discourse, and acceptive discourse. These discourses come from different social positions, media, and speakers. They either contradict or complement with each other, and are directed to different goals or social functions.

In order to make account for these multiple discourses, I draw on recent literature on the body (Shilling, Bauman), moral judgment (Vaisey, Haidt), and binary moral discourses (Alexander, Hunter). I argue that different life/death dilemmas generate different types of moral discourses, different modes of social control and power relation.

In *Chapter Three*, I depict the economic and cultural life of survivors living in the new towns. It includes three topics: (a) The background knowledge about the two towns, and the government's planning and execution of reconstruction and resettlement. (b) The major storylines of the survivors' life experiences along the four years after the earthquake; and the structural factors that influence the survivors' material and psychological resilience and well-being; (c) The local cultural entrepreneur who take efforts to preserve or promote local cultures, in order to maintain the continuity of the towns' cultural life.

This chapter makes dialogue with literature on "vulnerability" and "resilience." I examine demographic factors (gender, class, age) and other structural factors (work unit, governmental policy on subsidy and compensation, etc) that influence the survivors' post-disaster life trajectory, access to resources, and well-being.

Chapter Four deals with "theodicy," that is, the meaning-making and social agendas

related to the disaster. Theodicy is any discourse concerned with these questions: Why there is disaster/ suffering? What is the purpose or benefit of it? Why me/ Why here? What should I do? Theodicy provides explanations or narratives that enable people to make sense and endure disaster/suffering. In my work, I use the term "theodicy" to refer to all religious and non-religious discourses which aim to explain the meaning of disaster, including sociodicy.

This chapter demonstrates that theodicy is not only a system of thoughts in human mind. Rather, it has become cultural schema/repertoire linked with social actions and agendas that fulfill social agents' interests or goals. I compare different versions of theodicy, and the political/moral agendas launched by certain institutional forces. I sort them into three threads: (i) the responsibility and legitimacy of the state; (ii) the religious theodicies; (iii) psychology of trauma and recovery.

The first thread was manifested by two antagonistic social agents and interests in the public/political sphere. On the one hand, the government holds the scientific, geological explanation as the official discourse, seeing the disaster as merely a result of natural force. At the same time, it embraces the developmental ideology aimed to make the disaster zone a better place, and celebrates its high efficiency and great achievement in the post-disaster reconstruction. It uses this "performance" to maintain and heighten its administrative legitimacy. On the other hand, a group of survivors and activists looks at the problem of construction quality, which they consider as the major cause of the severe damage and high death toll. This agenda calls for investigation on governmental corruption. It is not surprising that this group has been repressed by the government. The two social groups in question (the government and the survivors/activists) focus on

different dimensions of disaster (the former on reconstruction, the latter the cause of high damage), based on their specific interests.

Religious theodicy contains variety as well. I sort out three sub-types. "Punitive theodicy" rendered the disaster as God's punishment to human sins. "Non-punitive theodicy" saw the disaster as a sign, a blessing or a lesson through which humans learn certain truth or wisdom. Still another type is "pragmatism," which put the problem of causality into bracket, and focused on social participation and practices instead. In general, religious theodicy is linked to religious or moral agendas (i.e., teaching and preaching) that urge people to behave well and have faith in God.

The third thread is dominated by the profession of psychology. They guide the survivors to release emotion, to get through the sorrow, and find new meanings of life. Contrasting the first thread in the public/political sphere, they tend to see the survivors' grief and resentment as individual problem in the private sphere, and uses individualistic methodology to help them.

In sum, the antagonism between the state and anti-state activists touches the issue of legitimacy and justice, which is a political struggle that already exists in Chinese society for long. Religious theodicy is directed to moral judgment and social control over ordinary people's life style. Psychological intervention adopts individualistic technique to guide the survivors to release their emotion. Different versions of theodicy contain different agendas that focus on different social actors and social actions.

Chapter Five examines the post-disaster relief and socialization undertaken by religious organizations and agents. Shortly after the earthquake, great number of individuals and organizations, either within or without the province, poured into the

impacted zones to offer aid and support. Many of them have religious background. They devoted their efforts to the relief work, driven by certain religious motifs. I examine the variations of the way different religious organizations/agents offered aids and interacted with local people.

Based on the data collected from my fieldwork, I classify the religious organizations working on disaster relief into three types: (a) Christian and Buddhist communities which are recognized and administrated by the government. (b) NGOs established by religious believers after the earthquake. (c) Christian missionaries.

I attempt to figure out how the organization's features, goals, and governmental regulations influence the way they participated in relief works and reconstruction, and established relationship with local people: (a) The government-recognized churches or temples offer material aids and psychological consolations in the early stage after the earthquake, without deliberately preaching religious message. Many of the local churches/temples themselves were damaged or even collapsed. The priests and believers made huge endeavors to acquire outside support to rebuild the churches/temples even bigger and more splendid. In the stage of reconstruction, ambitious priests devoted more efforts to teaching religious beliefs and non-religious wisdoms in legal sites. It is a sign of religious revival after the disaster. (b) The religion-affiliated NGOs offer aids, launch community activities, summer camps, and educational programs, without publically preaching religious messages, due to the governmental regulation. They generally obey the regulation in order to maintain good relationship with the government, which is necessary for their survival. However, individual staffs might still preach in private spheres when they think it is proper or needed to do so. (c) The Christian missionaries

sent by house churches have strong ambition to preach Gospels in the earthquake zones. However, a successful strategy of preaching tends to be indirect. Some of them went deeply into rural or mountainous areas, accompanying with the local survivors closely, living and working with them for a long time. In this way they formed close relationship and trust with local people, and thus gradually made some to convert, and created small churches therein. Since their preaching is not "legal," they occasionally get into trouble with the police or governmental officials.

Chapter Six returns to the issue of life and death, from a different angle than Chapter Two, looking at how the survivors construe the meaning of life and death. This Chapter takes the viewpoint of sociology of knowledge, and echoes Swidler's *Talk of Love*, examining how people in different social positions respond to existential questions about life and death (i.e., the meaning or purpose of life and death) in various ways. I try to answer two questions: What is the connection between social position and consciousness? What is the relationship between existential thinking and everyday life? The sources of data include published texts and in-depth interview.

Many Chinese scholars and writers express their thoughts about life and death through publication, including journals or books. Their narratives tend to be sophisticate. Driven by existential impulse and intellectual orientation, they are eager to search for meaning of life and death. However, this group of narratives hardly gains wide audiences beyond the well-educated circle.

In my own fieldwork in the earthquake zones, questions about life and death generate much diverse responses from the respondents. I sort out four types of responses: (1) unawareness, (2) self-distancing, (3) association with meaning and order, (4) suspension

of meaning or control. I found that the types of "unawareness" and "categorical distancing" are related to boundary making and symbolic exclusion. Respondents with low education level tend to disregard or have no idea about it. On the other hand, the type of "existential distancing" is not about social position and exclusion, but how the individual perceives and feels about this question.

Second, echoing recent understanding about culture and action, the connection between existential thinking and daily life is vague and ambiguous. Many interviewees, who express passive or conservative messages in existential thinking, actively participate in or even lead social activities that make their lives meaningful. Yet we should not negate the significance of existential thinking too hastily, and could further investigate how the two seemingly contradictory realms co-exist in the individual's social life.

Chapter Seven is the conclusion of the whole work. I will integrate the findings of all chapters and then make a final summary.

Chapter Two

Decisions about Life and Death in the Sichuan Earthquake

I. Introduction: Sociology of morality

Beside direct damage to human life and property, the earthquake created situations that forced people to make a choice between life and death, in which the individual's desire might clash with social norms. This chapter examines the moral struggle between the individual's will and social norms *when the two conflict with each other* during and shortly after the earthquake. It was the earliest stage when people encountered problems of meaning and order, regarding what one should do in extreme situations. I particularly focus on the diverse moral discourses and reasonings involved in the individual's will to life or death, including: orthodox, individualistic, death, therapeutic, and acceptive discourses.

In Chapter One, I reviewed literature in the sociology of disaster that studied people's social and organizational behavior in response to disastrous events. They generally debunked the often exaggerated and distorted myth presented by the mass media about panic, chaos, riot, and other antisocial behaviors. Instead, they suggested that people typically act in line with social norms, with positive concern about social ties, community, and adaptation (Fischer 1998; Fritz 1961; Johnson, Feinberg and Johnston 1994; Quarantelli and Dynes 1972; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). These researches, however, took the "social norm" in question for granted, while paying little attention to the complexity of moral choice, namely, how people form decisions or the inclination toward certain actions, how social agents communicate different moral principles or narratives, and judge or debate with others. To examine these aspects, I draw on the

sociology of morality and cultural sociology.

Morality has been in the spotlight of sociology since the early stages of the discipline. Durkheim's works discussed different types of moral order generated in different societies (1997), the effect of solidarity on suicide rates (1979), and collective effervescence as the origin of solidarity and moral order (1995). Weber traced the religious ethic that evolved into economic motivation (2002). Parsons (1968) and Merton (1968) followed Weber's paradigm, speculating that the individual's actions are guided by a system of beliefs, values, and norms. But this "value-rational" model of social action has been questioned by later scholars (Harding 2007; Small 2002; Swidler 2001).

Recent trends in cultural sociology approach the topic of morality from many different angles. Alexander (2002, 2003, with Smith 1993) looks at the cultural construction of moral discourses, suggesting that the "moral universals" in human societies is basically dominated by a general, enduring binary code of "good vs. evil." It does not mean that morality is merely an abstract symbolic system. Rather, it is embodied in the individual's sensation, emotion, action, and social interaction (Bauman 1993; Ignatow 2009a; Ignatow 2009b; Shilling 2005; Shilling and Mellor 1998). On the other hand, contrasting Weber's and Parsons' model of voluntarism, recent scholars tend to see the motif of moral action as either intuition or some unconscious schema, though the individual might use elaborated discourse to make *post hoc* justifications or reasoning for his actions (Haidt 2001; Haidt 2008; Vaisey 2009).

This chapter uses cases of choice and will to life and death to dialogue with the literature on morality. I argue that moral choice and judgment are complicated social processes that can hardly be explained by any single, simple model. Also, different moral

problems involve different modes of moral judgment, social control, and conflict. In the following section, I introduce the major theme of my case study first, and then discuss recent moral literature in three areas: Embodiment, dual-process, and binary code.

Choice and will to life and death

The choice of life and death surrounding the earthquake occurred at many different points in time for different people. First, when the earthquake occurred, those who stayed indoors needed to decide whether they should run for survival or stay to help or protect other people.[26] Second, when people were trapped in a collapsed building and waiting for rescue, they often underwent a painful and solitary experience that threatened their will to survive. Third, after the earthquake, individuals faced damaged homes and logistical difficulties that made daily living particularly disheartening.

Based on accessible data from published texts, internet discussions, and in-depth interviews of earthquake survivors, I summarize four types of decisions or ideations about life and death. They form two pairs of moral dilemmas. The first dilemma "Escape for oneself vs. Die for others" arises when one's survival competes with others' survival. The second dilemma "Die in despair vs. Survive for others" is a life/death ideation that emerges when one suffers from pain or stress caused by the disaster.

(i) Die for others: Under this schema, one dies in order to save or protect other people during the earthquake. Most cases that fell into this category were school teachers taking care of their students. (ii) Escape for oneself: One escapes from dangerous places without taking care of others.

(iii) Die in despair: During or shortly after the earthquake, the victims suffered from

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[26] Another possibility is that one might choose to stay indoors to survive, though he would not have known whether the building would collapse or not. This case is beyond the concern of this essay.

physical and/or psychological pain. Some of them might give up and surrender themselves to death, either passively waiting to die or actively trying to kill themselves. (iv) Survive for others: In spite of the unendurable pain or suffering, one might still maintain or regain faith and the resolution to survive.

As we shall see, the life/death choice is not an individual, free act conducted in a vacuum. It involves moral orders that define what is right and wrong along with the meaning systems that provide goals and purpose for the individual. They are further linked to certain cultural schemas and discourses about the relationship between the individual and society. In the following pages, I review three groups of literature in recent cultural sociology. They deal with moral sentiment and behavior at different levels, all of which were expressed in the case of disaster response. The aim of this chapter is to show how these different levels of moral reality were involved in moral dilemmas.

Literature of morality: Embodiment, dual-process, binary code

The choice or will to life and death involves many dimensions of moral sentiment and behavior. Now I discuss the literature of three topics: embodiment, dual-process, and binary code. I try to link my case study to the literature, indicating its specific nuance.

Embodiment

Complementing most sociological literature's focus on structure, schema, repertoire, and the "cognitive" dimension of social life, a group of scholars emphasize the role of body in human behavior, and its relationship to social structure and ideology (Csordas 1994; Featherstone 2000; Leder 1990; Turner 1984). Some of them specifically link the body to morality. For instance, Bauman (1993, 1995) speculates that the individual's empathic bodily impulse of "being for the other" is the source of moral action that could

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stand against the moral decline of modern society. Ignatow (2009b) construes moral emotion and judgment as products of internalized *habitus*, which is acquired from the individual's social origin and could determine his/her social networking.

Shilling (2005) and Shilling and Mellor (1998) revisit Durkheim's ideas of *homo duplex* and collective effervescence, both of which are based on the human body, as the source of morality. According to Durkheim (1973, 1979, 1995), the individual's biological body has its own desire and instinct, which tend to be egoistic and unstable. However, the experience of collective effervescence emerging from religious ritual could transform it into a *social body*, in which one gains emotional energy and moral sensitivity. This duality forms a potential tension in the individual that appears in certain situations, e.g., a life-threatening event.

The life/death choice during the earthquake is an extreme case of how the body is involved in a moral decision. First, when the deadly event occurred, the individual needed to make a quick decision whether he should run for survival or stay to take care of others. At this moment, both the individual's "natural" instinct to survive and the "cultural" schema of responsibility could be strong and thus clash with each other. Second, when a victim was trapped in a collapsed building, his body would suffer from great pain that threaten his will to survive. However, his memory of social life might re-strengthen his emotional energy to endure the pain and persevere to survive. Third, in both situations, the focus of the moral dilemma is not only the body, but the victim's life. The choice of "die for others" is a life-sacrifice action in which the victim decides to give his life to serve the survival of the others. On the contrary, either the physical or psychological pain caused by the disaster might quench the victim's will to survive,

making him give up hope or even seek to die. These struggles are further bonded to different ideologies as discussed below.

Dual-process of moral judgment

Early sociologists (especially Weber's and Parsons' "value-rational" model) tended to see social action as guided by norms, values, and beliefs. This position has been challenged by Mills (1940) and Scott and Lyman (1968). Later scholars gradually came to see cultural narratives as "repertoires" used by social actors to justify or make account of past choices and actions (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999; Swidler 2001). This thesis leaves the problem of "motivation" unanswered. More recently, Vaisey (2009) tries to solve the problem of motivation vs. justification, and proposes a "dual-process model" based on survey data on moral judgment. He differentiates "practical" consciousness and "discursive" consciousness. The former is a deeply internalized cultural schema that motivates the subjects' actions, though often unconscious or hard to articulate. The latter is conscious thinking, in the form of narrative or argument, etc, capable of *post hoc* sense-making, deliberation and justification.

This model needs supplemental adjustments. Rather than seeing moral judgment as a pure individual act in vacuum, we need to take social interaction into account. Haidt, a social psychologist, proposes a "social intuitionist model" of moral judgment (2001)[27]. Similarly to Vaisey's 2009 paper, he concludes that moral judgment is primarily created by automatic intuition rather than deliberate reasoning. However, he does not rule out, but incorporates other possible mechanisms into his model, including social influences

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[27] According to Haidt's review (2001), the field of psychology underwent a paradigm shift parallel to sociology in the past decades. The school of cognition, emerging in early 1970s, tended to emphasize the importance of reasoning and reflection. However, later scholars gradually discovered the more powerful roles of emotion, intuition, and unconsciousness.

and norms, and personal reasoning and reflection. These pathways happen in everyday life with comparatively weak power and frequency. I postulate that all these mechanisms of social interaction and inner reflection co-exist in everyday life, and may precipitate upon or even change the underlying moral intuition or schema. It is shown in my case study, in which the social agents dialogued with others, as well as reflected upon their own thoughts with multiple inner voices. These forms of moral discourse (what Vaisey calls "discursive consciousness") are not merely "justification." Rather, they articulate various kinds of feeling, emotion, and worldview surrounding the issue of life and death. They form an ever ongoing process of dialogue and dialectic, rather than a once-and-for-all solution. As Pugh (2013) puts it, they reveal conflicts of individual will and social norms, conflicts of different moral ideologies, and modes of interpersonal power relation. These are cultural contents of *sui generis* quality, though not as a predictive factor of individual action.

Binary code and moral discourses

Although Alexander (1993, 2002, 2003) suggests the universal and enduring power of the binary moral code, such as good vs. evil, it is often seen that social groups or agents always have disagreements about what is good and evil. The Nazi leaders and American politicians in Alexander's case studies all had their definitions of good and evil, though different from others.

In modern society, one can find several competing moral discourses or ideologies, which originated from different historical and cultural backgrounds. For instance, Frerichs and Münch (2010) summarize four moral discourses which form two dichotomous oppositions: Eschatology (religious order) vs. evolution (natural order);

enlightenment (individualism) vs. embeddedness (collectivism). Although the progress of modernity brought about the trend of enlightenment and disenchantment, the traditional and religious ideologies never disappear. They might even mobilize and strengthen themselves in certain circumstances. For instance, Hunter (1991, 2006) proposes the concept of "culture war," referring to the polarized conflict of orthodox and progressivist ideologies in American public space. This "war" is not only rooted in American history, but also derived from the deep logic of human culture, that it is a "commonplace of structural semiotics that our experience of the world is made meaningful through comparisons and oppositions (2006:33)."

However, not all moral discourses are antagonistic binary ones. My case study on earthquake survivors' life/death choices show the existence of both binary and non-binary discourses, depending on the nature of the dilemma, and the mechanism of social control related to it, as shown in my analysis.

Summary

The three topics reviewed above can be integrated as the chart shows below. I suggest that moral judgment and action contain three layers of reality: body, schema, and discourse. As shown in the data presented below, the locus of a moral dilemma may shift from one specific layer to another, as the individual perceives the situation, makes a decision, and then produces post hoc discourses about it.

These three layers of reality are not clear-cut entities separated from each other. They are rather intertwined with each other. For instance, recent literature on the body finds several linkages between the body, emotion, and cognition. Also, deliberately constructed discourses are always built on cultural schema such as good and bad, right and wrong.

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However, as reviewed above, they might still act in different ways or move toward different directions. This is what this chapter deals with.

Layer of reality	Properties of moral behavior
Discourse	Deliberately constructed discourses, either of binary or non-binary structure
Schema	Automatic, practical, unconscious, enduring, deeply internalized schema
Body	Biological instinct collective effervescence

I summarize the nature of my case study based on this framework. Life/death choice at the time of earthquake was a quick decision driven by either bodily instinct or cultural schema, which might converge or conflict with each other. This belongs to what Vaisey called "practical consciousness." However, the social interaction and inner reflection *after* the disaster, namely, the "discursive consciousness," also has its significance beyond merely "justification." They reveal the tension between the individual and the society, and the way in which the individual or social group defines what good is, and establish meaning and order upon life and death. They take the form of binary or non-binary discourses, depending on what life/death dilemma is involved.

II. Case study on life/death choice

In the earlier section, I listed four types of life/death choice: (i) Die for others; (ii) Escape for oneself; (iii) Die in despair; (iv) Survive for the others. To analyze life/death choices of the victims and survivors, I examine two perspectives: (a) The victim's own inner conversation or public expression about life/death choice; (b) How the bystanders evaluate or respond to the protagonist's decision or action. I acquire empirical data from multiple sources. The first is "survivor literature." After the earthquake, quite a lot of

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survivors and institutions published writings (via printed works or on the internet) on their memories, emotions, and thoughts about the earthquake, their lost towns and the dead. Many of them described the moments when they witnessed other people die, or their own experiences of being close to death. Some writers articulated certain kinds of feeling about, reflection on, and redefinition of life and death. This survivor literature is an important source of data that reveals the moral and existential dimensions of their experiences. The second source is public opinions and reportage by journalists, scholars, and ordinary people. As reviewed in Chapter One, public opinions and discourses flourishing in the culture industry and internet forums are signs of rising civil society not dictated by the state. Third, I myself conducted fieldwork in Hanwang and Beichuan, the two most seriously damaged towns in the earthquake zone. I interviewed local survivors who experienced the earthquake, as well as outside supporters such as psychotherapists, volunteers and social workers. The narrative I collected in the field differs from published texts[28].

Life/death choices and moral discourses

The four types of life/death choice form two sets of dichotomous antagonism, as shown in Figure 1. They originated in different situations, and generate different moral issues.

The first dichotomy "Escape for oneself vs. Die for others" is the decision the individual made when the earthquake occurred. He made the decision quickly, either due to bodily instinct or deeply internalized cultural schema[29]. It is difficult to verify the

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[28] All quotations selected from these data sources are translated from original Chinese texts by the researcher.
[29] Another possibility is that the individual was severely shocked and could not make any decision. However, it is beyond the scope of my study.

"real" motivation that drove each person to act the way he did. What we can approach is the *post hoc* narratives made by survivors about themselves and about others they witnessed. The moral dilemma inherent in these narratives is the antagonism between egoism and altruism.

The second dichotomy "Survive for others vs. Die in despair" is about meaning and solidarity. It occurred after the earthquake, when someone was trapped in collapsed buildings, or suffered from the material and/or psychological impact caused by the earthquake. It was not a quick decision or action, but rather an emotional reaction to the suffering or pain that lasted for a certain time period. Thus it is more proper to label it as a "will" or "ideation" rather than "choice." The will to "survive for others" can be seen as resulting from the successful functioning of social solidarity and meaning systems. Contrarily, the will to "die in despair" is a consequence of loss of solidarity and meaning, as the individual's self loses support from the society and then surrenders itself to death.

Loss of solidarity/meaning   Egoism

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┌─────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────┐
│                 │              │                 │
│  Die in despair │              │ Escape for oneself │
│                 │              │                 │
└─────────────────┘              └─────────────────┘
         ↕                                ↕
┌─────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────┐
│                 │              │                 │
│ Survive for others │           │  Die for others │
│                 │              │                 │
└─────────────────┘              └─────────────────┘
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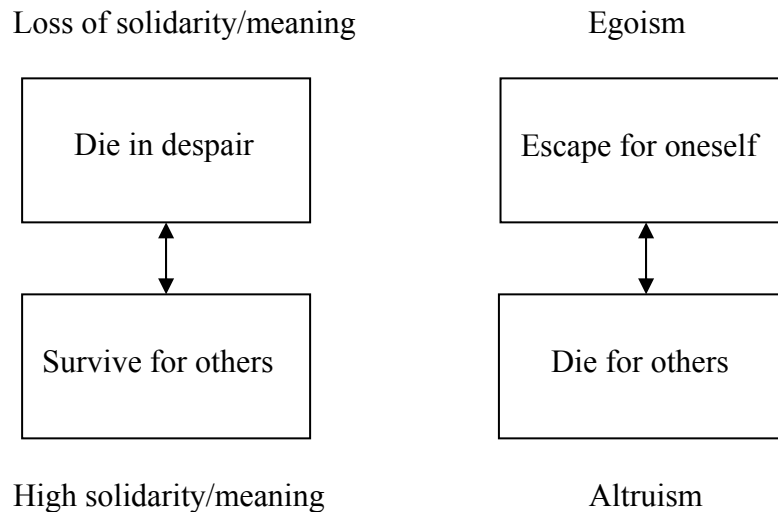High solidarity/meaning   Altruism

Fig 1. The four types of life/death choice

The published or spoken texts of the survivors and bystanders appear as either one person's monologues or multi-vocal dialogues, expressing the variety and complexity of

moral judgment summarized in Haidt (2001). Among them I find five types of discourses that express certain moral value or meaning on life/death choice from different angles. They are: orthodox, individualistic[30], death, therapeutic, and acceptive discourses. The orthodox discourse represents the values of community, responsibility, altruism, and the positive meaning of life. Under this discourse, the choice of "die for others" is a highly honorable action; while "escape for oneself" is egoistic and shameful. Contrarily, the individualistic discourse advances the right and freedom of the individual to protect his own life. These two discourses form a binary opposition, as they possess contesting views about right and wrong, about the ideal relationship of the individual and society. They confirm Alexander's thesis about good vs. evil (2002, 2003), and are similar to Hunter's idea of "culture war" (1991, 2006).

As for the dichotomy of "survive for others vs. die in despair," things are different. The orthodox discourse sanctions the former and devalues the latter. But there is no strong opposing discourse that publically legitimates the will to die in despair. People who express the death discourse either passively wait to die or actively wish to die. This contrasts with orthodox discourse, but with much weaker strength than the individualistic discourse mentioned above. Meanwhile, there are other types of discourses that take non-binary positions on this issue. The therapeutic discourse aims to guide the survivor, who wishes to die, to regain meaning of life. The acceptive discourse tends to accept whatever one's fate is, be it living or dying. The variation of non-binary discourse is inexhaustible, since there are infinite ways to construe the nature of death, and one's attitude toward it.

In the next section, I will present how these discourses are involved in the issue of

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[30] I do not completely adopt Hunter's terminology of "orthodox vs. progressivist" ideologies, since the term "progressivist" can imply a positive connotation. I would rather label it as "individualistic discourse" that directly indicates its viewpoint.

life/death choice. They either appear in the choice-forming process, or make comments or critiques on certain choices.

(1) Die for others vs. escape for oneself – The antagonism between orthodox and individualistic discourses

The tension between the individual and society through the historical progress of modernity has been an old topic in sociology. Durkheim (1979, 1997) compared traditional society with modern society. The former tends to have a strong, unified collective conscience, having coercive power over the individual. The latter gives the individual more respect and allows one to develop one's own personality. These two types of morality can be termed as collectivism and individualism respectively. However, this uni-linear model of historical progress seems to be too simplistic. Later literature shows that there are various versions of conformism (Riesman, Glazer and Denney 1961) and individualism (Bellah 2008) coexisting in modern society. Studies on Asian culture also show this complexity. Yan's researches (2003, 2009, 2011) observe the ethic shift in the post-reform China. Due to the progress of privatization and market economy, the collectivist ethic once dictated by the party-state, which worshiped responsibility and self-sacrifice, has been replaced by the emerging individual-centered morality. Nowadays Chinese people, especially young people, are eager to pursue personal happiness, rights, success, and freedom. However, altruistic behavior still happens, such as the huge trend of volunteerism in young people following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.

I make two comments regarding the literature reviewed above and empirical data presented below. First, much of the literature, including Durkheim's works, depicts a

linear progress of historical change, in which the transformation of the society causes transformation in solidarity and morality. However, this framework is less helpful when analyzing an extremely complicated modern society, in which different moral ethos and practices co-exist and it is hard to identify the historical origin of any given moral paradigm, say, altruism and individualism (as we will see below). It is especially true for contemporary China since it underwent a peculiar historical trajectory of social upheaval and reform that does not fit a simplistic linear model of social change. Second, a moral ethos is not a static reality that exists somewhere consistently in the society. It appears when people summon it in the face of life situations and events. And people might choose a different ethos to cope with different situations. For instance, in ordinary life, people pursue their own interests and goals. They would protect and fight for their rights if threatened by others. Contrarily, a disaster or terrorist attack might trigger in them sympathy, altruistic and patriotic spirit.

First, I present the dichotomy of "die for others vs. escape for oneself," along with the dichotomy of "orthodox vs. individualistic" discourses.

(i) Die for others

When the earthquake occurred and became serious, the normal response of most people was to run out from the buildings, or find something to shield themselves. However, one group of people did not run away, though they had the chance to run. Instead, they chose to protect or take care of other people. Most of them were school teachers taking care of students. And there were structural factors that made school teachers the major population that conducted self-sacrificing actions. First, according to the public's retrospective opinions, it is believed that school teachers have the duty to

save and protect their students. Also, it is believed that under-age students[31], unlike adults, are incapable of saving themselves; and thus rely on teachers to guide them. Second, unlike ordinary indoor places, the design of a classroom is not convenient for escaping. A classroom can accommodate many students (up to 50) and has only two exists. When an earthquake occurs, it is expected that someone should stay firm and organize the students to escape in an orderly and efficient way. Third, there are many schools that seriously collapsed due to the earthquake. Local people, especially students' families, observed (or suspected) that schools have a higher rate of collapse than other buildings, which is a sign of bad quality of construction. Given the physical crowdedness of schools, the high collapse rate boosted the death toll of teachers and students. These factors imposed a heavy burden and risk on school teachers, who were actually not well trained or equipped to handle the situation.

Due to the choice of staying rather than running, many teachers died as the schools collapsed. Their sacrifice has been honored, thanked, mourned, and commemorated by the schools, the surviving students, and the media. They became a symbol of "great love" spirit, altruism, and responsibility.

For teachers who lost their lives, we could not examine their first-person perspective, thus we have to look at the witnesses' descriptions and evaluations of them. I quote a story of Ms. Li, a teacher in Beichuan High School, which was published on a news report (Li et al, 2009)[32]:

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[31] The seriously damaged areas are rural villages, small towns, and mountainous areas, where high schools are the most advanced education institutions. There is no college or university located there. Hence the "students" mentioned here are all teenage adolescents or younger children.

[32] The news report can be retrieved online: http://scnews.newssc.org/system/2008/06/08/010883633.shtml. It is also re-printed in an essay collection *Beichuan Memory* (2009), where one can find more stories of self-sacrificing teachers.

"Left the hope of life to students; kept the danger of death to themselves."[33] After the earthquake, a student in Beichuan High School wrote it. In this huge earthquake, 41 teachers in the school died. Most of them had a chance to escape. But they chose to leave the hope of life to students, using their lives to interpret the essence of *shide* (virtue of being a teacher). …When the earthquake occurred, she (Ms. Li) could have been the first one to run out of the classroom. But she desperately used her small and weak body to push students out. More than 30 students survived. But she was trapped under a collapsed concrete board with few students…In that narrow and dark space, in order to give those students confidence to survive, Ms. Li stood the pain, chatting, and telling stories and jokes with the kids. Due to her consolation and encouragement, the kids survived for three days and three nights. Later on, Ms. Li had a bad feeling…and took her ear rings and bracelet off, entrusting them to the kids to hand them to her family. Soon, Ms. Li closed her eyes quietly…

This is an example of teachers who sacrificed themselves to save students. Such stories usually emphasize that the teachers had a chance to escape. It is a necessary premise that proves their altruistic actions as truly self-determined actions worthy to be revered. Second, a crucial part of this story is that Ms. Li made an effort to cheer the students around her, to maintain emotional energy and solidarity among the trapped crowd. However, she died eventually. It conveys an image that she sacrifices her life to support the children. She exchanged her life, physical and spiritual, for her students' lives.

The problem of stories about dead persons is their credibility and correctness. Some stories might even be fabrication made up by local survivors and journalists. For instance, three journalists from an official media visited a high school in Hanwang, a seriously damaged town. They reported that a teacher, Mr. Tan, died protecting four students under a desk with his body and arms as the school collapsed. Those students were rescued and survived, but Tan died[34]. He was then highly honored by the media, the party-state, and

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[33] This verse leaves out the subject term, which is the self-sacrificing teachers in this context.
[34] The text of the original news can be found via a re-post online:
http://www.360doc.com/content/08/0612/15/54666_1328297.shtml

the general public. A few media-related institutions in Tan's home province built a statue to commemorate him. Two years later, some liberalist journalists doubtful of the story visited the school to probe the truth. They discovered that the story is fake, and everybody in the school knew it. The vice-principal gave a revealing comment: "In that situation, [we] need such a man, a hero's anecdote, to provide inspiration for people, something that could be counted on for [people's] thought. As for the true circumstance, it is hard to talk about, and should not be talked about." [35] This case puts other stories about self-sacrificing teachers in doubt, though it does not totally negate them.

(ii) Escape for oneself

Fan Meizhong is a high school teacher and amateur liberalist writer in Dujiangyan City. According to his blog, he is enthusiastic in and dedicated himself to secondary education. He has long been concerned with the problem of Chinese education, which represses students' freedom and creativity, and teaches lies in humanity classes. He calls it "*yumin* education," meaning education that fools people. When the earthquake occurred, Fan ran out from the classroom to the playground, leaving all his students behind. The building remained intact and nobody got injured. One might assume that actually lots of people did the same thing out of choice or instinct. However, Fan's case is unique that he made his decision public, and infused liberalist ideology that worships freedom and rights.

Ten days after the earthquake, Fan posted an article on his blog[36], starting with a lamentation on his misery of living in China, as a prelude followed by the experience of a sudden, unexpected natural disaster:

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[35] The news can be retrieved via the link: http://finance.southcn.com/f/2010-10/22/content_16932682.htm. According to this article, the teacher did die for the earthquake. But nobody witnessed what was described in the story about his self-sacrificing.
[36] "At That Moment, Earth Moved and Mountains Shook," posted on 2008.05.22: http://blog.tianya.cn/blogger/post_read.asp?BlogID=332774&PostID=13984999

I once felt painful to death, for not being born in a country like America, where there is freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights! Because it's about my suffering for more than ten years since I graduated from college. It's about 17 years of bad education I suffered. For countless times I questioned God: Why did you give me a soul who loves freedom and truth, yet made me born in such an autocratic and dark China?...But these pains could be seen by some people as illusory, nearly neurotic pain…I never encountered a war, never encountered a huge flood!...But what has to come will come eventually! Without any preparation in mind, I experienced…the most horrible experience in the whole life: 5.12 Wenchuan 8.0 scale huge earthquake!

Fan did not clarify the reason he mentioned his discontent with China here. After describing what happened during the disaster, he explained his decision to run:

I told the students who felt disappointed with me: "I am a person who pursues freedom and justice, yet not one who is brave to sacrifice oneself...At such a moment of decision of life and death, only for my daughter's sake would I consider sacrificing myself. I would not take care of any other people, including my mother. Because I am incapable of carrying an adult, at extreme moment one person who escapes counts one. If it's too dangerous, then it is meaningless that I die with you. If it's not so dangerous, then you're not in danger even if I don't take care of you, let alone you are 17 or 18 years old!" It is perhaps my excuse, yet I don't have a slight sense of guilt. I also told my students: "I am definitely not a person who bravely fights with gangster carrying a knife!" Although I said so, when danger comes next time, I still couldn't foresee what I will do.

As a violation of the collective conscience, this monologue invoked a great amount of debate on mass media and the internet. Fan received overwhelming blame from the general public, saying he is selfish, shameless, and inhuman; he failed the duty of a teacher; he failed the students' and parents' trust in him, and so on. Some said it is fine to escape but he should not reveal it to the public. Somebody made him a nickname: Fan Paopao ("pao" means "run"). Due to the pressure from the public, his school dismissed him.

Besides emotional, aggressive blame on Fan, some intellectuals noticed Fan's

"liberalist" and pro-western rhetoric, and attempted to correct and deconstruct it. A professor in Philosophy, Deng Anqing, responded to Fan's article:

> [Fan] claimed he believes in freedom and justice, and claimed that it's unnecessary to sacrifice his own life to save others' lives…I don't want to make moral judgment on his behavior. What I want to say is, even in this man who claimed to believe in western values, he doesn't have any "consciousness of citizenship." Since a man with consciousness of citizenship should undoubtedly think of his being a "teacher," and the "duty" he has to fulfill…Protecting students' life safety is a teacher's basic duty. He doesn't even know these, and wants to advertise the independence and freedom of his thoughts, and defend his escape out of the instinct of "self-preservation." It can't be explained by our traditional kinship ethics. It can't be explained by western consciousness of citizen, neither. It is probably a typical non-Chinese and non-western, non-native and non-foreign "cultural monster." (Dongfang, 2008:11-2)

This passage nullifies Fan's pro-western rhetoric by introducing the concept of "consciousness of citizen," which he probably thought of as an important element of western values; and linked it to the necessity of "duty." Another critic, Fangzhouzi, cited a code of practices for educators in the U.S., and proposed that Fan would be dismissed by a U.S. school if he did the same thing there (2008).

The emphasis on duty represents the morality of orthodox ideology. However, the significance of Fan's position lay not in the problem of morality and duty; but in the total discontent with Chinese society and education. It even penetrated the paradoxical nature of social control (looking back to Durkheim, Mead, Goffman), which inherently conceives the possibility of conflict, repression, and fake. At this point, I label Fan's purpose and his supporters' opinions as "individualistic discourse."

The antagonism of orthodox vs. individualistic discourses

In order to clarify his purpose in making provocative opinions, Fan Meizhong attended some televised interviews. He claimed that he deliberately used an extreme approach to

advocate "true" discourse and freedom of speech. He complained that Chinese education, media, and politics are full of untruth. A truth needed be told is that there is weakness in people like him, and we must admit it, so to change it. Second, it is teacher's responsibility to take care of students. But not necessarily to sacrifice one's life, which matters too much, unless it is written in a contract. Fan revealed that school teachers in China receive poor wages and welfare, yet bear high moral expectations from the public. It is a "moral kidnapping" since teachers' rights do not match their obligations. And last, he felt that China is a collectivist society where individual rights have not been well protected. The morality of sacrificing might repress the voice of individual rights. In this context, Fan deliberately used an excessively individualist discourse to advocate the legitimacy of individual rights[37]. To sum up, his basic concern is "truth" and "rights."

Besides Fan himself, there are other people who spoke for Fan and rendered his action legitimate or at least understandable[38]. The reasons supporting Fan include: Fan's action was driven by immediate, normal instinct; one should not ask others to do what he himself could not do; a teacher's duty does not include life-sacrificing; one should investigate the quality of the buildings rather than a teacher's morality, and punish those who committed corruption, and so on. Echoing Fan himself, some pro-Fan criticism aimed at the problem of Chinese history and culture that impose too much moral burden on the individual. They draw on individualist and liberalist ideas to build their discourses. A netizen wrote that "There have been such people throughout the Chinese history. They themselves are emperors in the palace of morality. They demand other people with high

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[37] I summarized these points from the televised interview hosted by *Tengxunwang*, 2008.6.7: http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/q5qmH8_b8K0/
[38] One can find lots of Fan debates in the online forum *Fan Meizhong Ba*: http://tieba.baidu.com/f?ie=utf-8&kw=%E8%8C%83%E7%BE%8E%E5%BF%A0

moral standard…and forget themselves." They secure their own interests through other people's practice, sacrifice and loss. The writer regarded the education in Chinese history as "*nuxing* (servility) education" in which people are trained as "*nucai*" (flunky) to serve superiors, while exploiting inferiors as their *nucai*[39]. Another writer reflected upon the sentiment of collectivism in the country:

> In this society, the individual's life is insignificant, not respected, and not worth mentioning. The society would rather advocate patriotism, collectivism, heroism, and statism; and would never praise individualism, hedonism, and private property. Through this propaganda, the State occupies the individual; the collective overwhelms the individual; the others defame the self. The society shows a one-dimensional appearance. The big collective is good; the small individual is bad…[40]

The two quotations expressed a reaction against collectivism that imposes a high moral standard on the individual and reinforces an unequal hierarchical relationship. And they deemed the problem as everlasting in Chinese history and education. Theoretically, it expresses the antagonism between collectivism and individualism, between exploitation and equal rights. Also, it is embedded in the specific context of Chinese history, especially the political movements and administration launched by the Communist regime, e.g., the Cultural Revolution (indeed quoted by Fan and pro-Fan critics).

   I make a comparison between orthodox discourse and individualistic discourse in terms of the moral codes of individual-society relationship they construe. The orthodox discourse favors altruism and collectivism, emphasizing responsibility and duty. Although it does not openly urge everybody to sacrifice one's life for saving others, it clearly disfavors egoistic behavior that fails to do so. On the contrary, individualistic

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[39] "Sorrow for Education: to Those Anti-Faners," posted by "Lhasa's winter" (2012.3.11): http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1451007271
[40] "On Emotional Chinese Society, from Criticisms against Fan Meizhong's Running," posted by "One of not knowing" (2008.06.11): http://bbs.news.163.com/bbs/guoji/82312945.html

discourse advocates individualism and liberalism. It accepts "limited" or "contractual" duty, calling for individual rights that match one's obligation. It respects the value of self-sacrificing, though refuses to make it a universal demand for all people. The voice of individualistic discourse echoes Yan's studies on the rising individualism in China (2003, 2009, 2011). However, it also demonstrates that the power of orthodox discourse is still strong, since individualistic discourse is in itself a critical reaction against orthodox discourse.

This comparison is a simplistic one that overlooks the complexity of moral value in a society and over-polarizes the two ideal types of moral ideology. We need to elaborate more on the dialectic nature of the debates. First, one should not simplify the antagonism between orthodox discourse and individualistic discourse as one of "Chinese/collective society vs. Western/liberal society." As Prof. Deng points out, western culture with liberal tradition also emphasizes the value of duty. Second, however, Fan is also reasonable in that different social backgrounds call for different moral discourses. Western society respects human rights and freedom in general; hence the demands of rights and duty are balanced. Contrarily, Chinese society tends to sacrifice individual rights to fulfill the nation's or the party-state's goal and need; hence it calls for a stronger voice of individualism.

And last, the individualistic discourse poses an opinion that questions the nature of Chinese society and all societies in general: the problem of truth and untruth. In the debates about sacrifice and escape, the individualistic discourse suggested that we speak the truth, to admit our weakness and selfishness. On the other hand, the orthodox discourse that holds altruism sometimes believes or even *produces* false messages, as

presented above.

The antagonism of orthodox discourse and individualistic discourse was a *post hoc* moral debate about what one actually did and one should do during the disaster. When the earthquake occurred, people made decisions quickly (or were shocked and could not make any decision), out of either bodily instinct or deeply internalized cultural schema (such as duty), which could hardly be verified. According to Haidt (2001) and Vaisey (2009), the *post hoc* representations and debates were something quite distant from the original "motivation." It was rather a social process in which different ideological positions struggled to define what/who are right and wrong, similar what Hunter calls "culture war." It is not merely a debate about what happened in the past, but also about which principle anyone should take in the future. I suggest that the individualistic discourse initiated by Fan was not a "justification" about his escape. He did not need to do so, as long as nobody other than his close network knew it. Also, it is not likely that he thought of the individualistic philosophy when he escaped. Rather, I construe that he "used" the issue of disaster response, particularly the public's sacralization of self-sacrificing, to challenge the orthodox social order that preexists in Chinese society and has been his own concern through his early life. He even created a quasi-intellectual viewpoint about the difference of western and Chinese society (mentioned above).

The orthodox discourse and individualistic discourse formed a binary opposition which is assumed as universal and enduring across time and culture (Alexander 2003, Hunter 2006). The orthodox discourse favors altruism, duty, and sacrifice; while the individualistic discourse upholds individualism, rights, and freedom. They both hold clear belief about what is right and wrong, and treat each other as a target of criticism. As

a comparison, the moral struggle of "die in despair vs. survive for others" is more complicated. The binary opposition is still found, but in a different form. And there are other non-binary discourses as well, as presented in the next section.

(2) Die in despair vs. Survive for others – The struggle between orthodox and death discourse

The second moral dilemma discussed in this essay is the life/death choice when one is under stress or pain that threatens one's will to survive. I present three essay quotations that demonstrate different stages of such "existential struggle": (i) Struggle with death under the debris; (ii) Struggle with death after the disaster. (iii) Re-definition of life.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995), Durkheim focused on the emotional linkage between the individual and society. He argued that religious ritual functions as a communal activity that generates collective effervescence, which further energizes the individual's mind and his loyalty to the community. Through periodical rituals, the society reaffirms its existence and authority, while the individual regains emotional energy needed for everyday life. This thesis is further developed by Goffman's idea of "interaction ritual" (1967) and Collins' idea of "interaction ritual chain" (2004). Collins proposes that the participants in social interactions could experience solidarity, emotional energy, symbols, and feelings of morality. Applying it back to Durkheim, it is these products of interaction ritual that enrich and support the individual's self, preventing him from losing energy and dissociating from the society, e.g., committing suicide. As we shall see, the experiences of earthquake victims show the existential struggle of losing and regaining the emotional energy to survive.

In the dilemma of "die for others vs. escape for oneself," the discourses were produced *after* the moral choice and action. However, in the dilemma of "survive for others vs. die in despair," the moral choice was an ongoing, enduring process rather than a one-time action. In this process, discourse was intertwined with body and emotion, not separated as many scholars suggest (see literature review).

(i) Struggle with death under the debris

The first example is a memoir *Survivor* (2008) written by Li Ximin (1966-), a novelist and former soldier who was in Sichuan writing his new work when the earthquake occurred. He was trapped in the collapsed building for three days before being rescued. He wrote down what happened to him, as well as a rich series of "internal conversations" that occurred when trapped, composed of memories about family and friends, bodily feeling and motions, and reflections on life and death. Many times, he faced the existential struggle between life and death, as he suffered from great pain, darkness, and isolation.

The tradition of symbolic interaction has studied internal conversions. Mead's dyadic model of "I-me" structure (1934) set up a foundation, further expanded by Wiley's model of "I-you-me" (1994) and Archer's model of "I-me-we-you" (2003). These models reveal different elements of the self that link the individual and others, and constitute a temporal unity of the past, present and future. Collins (2004) also interprets internal conversation as an internalized form of interaction ritual that generates emotional energy and solidarity. In Li's memoir, two antagonistic discourses can be found: orthodox and death discourses. The former worships the value of responsibility, social ties, and survival; the latter is willing to succumb to death. It shows the duality of the human body, as reviewed above

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(Durkheim 1973, Shilling and Mellor 1998, Shilling 2005). In Li's case, the unendurable bodily pain and solitude challenged his will to survive, and once really made him willing to die. But his inner vision of social life, based on previous bodily experience, provided a positive force that drove him to insist on survival. The two forces struggled back and forth.

Li noted what he thought of when he felt he was dying on the second day of the earthquake (Li, 2009:60):

> In the darkness, I feel my breath is getting more and more heavy. The steel bar pressing on my ribs seems to press on my heart; thus my heart might explode anytime. I suddenly feel I'm so *wonang* (useless). How could I be buried here and hardly able to move? Am I going to die for thirst, for starvation in this way? This is not the way I want to die. Dying this way doesn't match my way to die. If I died in a battlefield, so be it. If I died for fighting with an outlaw, so be it. If I were exhausted to death for my wife and children, so be it…How could I die in this way? I have to take care of my parents; my wife is still so young; my daughter is only one-year old; my brothers and sisters…There are so many things to be done. I can't die in this way. But for how long can I persist? At present, thirst is the biggest problem.

This passage starts from bodily pain and fear of death. He was not satisfied with the possibility of dying in a collapsed building, comparing it with other seemingly more valuable ways of dying. And then he thought of his family, the "significant others" that connect himself with society and give him strength to live. Finally he shifted his attention to bodily conditions again, to figure out how he could to keep on living.

However, after a long time of pain and despair, Li thought of committing suicide. He wrote: "Yes, I once thought of committing suicide. But I could find no way to kill myself, that is, I don't even have the capacity to kill myself. But soon I abandon the idea of suicide. There is no dignity in suicide! That is to betray life (90-1)." Then Li recalled the first time he wanted to kill himself. One day when he was young and fulfilling military

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service, his girlfriend broke up with him. At that night he attempted to cut his arm. His roommate ran into the room and interrupted his plan. When the roommate found out Li's plan, he shouted: "Are you still a fucking man? I always thought you were a *hanzi* (tough guy); never knew you are a coward! If a man is going to die, he should die standing! What the hell is suicide! (91)" This event probably became imprinted in Li's mind that reminding him of the moral failure of suicide whenever he wants to commit it. As Durkheim noted in *Suicide*, the army is a place with strong collective conscience and authority. His roommate's loud voice and fierce language was an expression of the authoritative sentiment internalized in soldiers' minds. The moral code that blames suicide seems to originate from a stereotypical expectation of masculinity, which is crucial for soldiers, as well as an ethical assertion rendering suicide as "no dignity," as a betrayal of life.

The last struggle occurred when he almost gave up the hope to live. This time he clearly noted two voices in his mind (111-2):

> At that time there were two I, struggling with each other. One I said: "Give up. If you die, you no longer suffer from the torture of pain. How meaningless is to live. There are so many things in the world that horrifies you. Even if you don't die in the earthquake, probably you would die in the next disaster, or die in a human accident…Living is worry and fear! Why not go to the blissful world (meaning the heaven), there is nothing to think about, nothing to fear of. My wife, farewell; Xiaohuai (his daughter), farewell…pa and ma, farewell; friends, farewell…I don't fear of death. I once said that death is the beginning of another path. See, I am walking on this path…"
> Another I said: "Li Ximin, you surrender like this? To die like this, is it worthy? For your own release, you leave your family and friends behind. How selfish you are!...There are still so many people in this world who love you and worry about your safety…You answer it with your conscience: You let so many people grieve for your death, are you hardhearted [to do so]?...You are a man. Where is you sense of responsibility?"
> It looks like there is a strand of light, illuminating my soul. I can't die. Let Death get away!

Suffering from pain for extremely long time, Li's self split into two. The first one surrendered himself to death. It is a passive will to let death take one away. It even posed a positive imagination that rendered death as a good thing, a release that liberates one from bad things in the world, and "the beginning of another path." However, these metaphysical, dreamy imaginations of death was dispersed, again, by Li's connection with significant others. He took the attitude of those others, paying sympathy to them, and then posed a moral imperative of responsibility that canceled the will to die.

Li's monologue is an excellent example of internal conversation in which antagonistic forces and voices co-exist in one's mind. Since he was trapped in a building alone, he could only talk to himself in his mind. When a group of people are trapped together, they could watch and talk to each other. In stories about students and teachers trapped together, the group used many ways to maintain interaction and support each one's faith and courage, such as: encourage each other, tell stories or jokes, make plans about the future, sing songs together, stop somebody from killing oneself, say last words to a partner when one feels he is dying, and so on (Feng 2009; Jin 2009; Li 2009). These are tough and rather meaningful collective efforts in the face of death, especially when people die one by one and the remaining living gradually lose hope.

(ii) Struggle with death after the disaster

The second stage of the existential struggle of life and death is illustrated by a student of Beichuan High School who wanted to die *after* the disaster. The school collapsed and more than one thousand students died. The surviving ones underwent difficulties in coping with the huge loss. The student's essay quoted here noted a dialogue between her and her father, a significant other with authority over her (Beichuan High School,

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2009:67-8):

My families, friends, and classmates passed away. Everything was so sudden, and made me often on the edge of breakdown. I often thought, since it was so painful to live, I would rather die…[Father] said: "Your saying is to make me live in hell! Father is worried about you day and night! You need to know, you were so lucky to survive…If you choose to die, Father and Mother won't forgive you; the family members, friends and classmates who passed away won't forgive you, neither…" Hearing the voice on the phone, I thought I was wrong. So many innocent lives left me and made me in great pain. Yet they had no choice. I chose to die to escape the pain in my heart, while bringing new pain to the living people who cared about me. Am I not too selfish?

A passage in Shi Tiesheng's *My Subway* occurred to me: "When a man is born, it is no longer a disputable question; it is rather a fact God hands over to him. When God hands it over to us, He guarantees its result. Hence death is not something one needs to accomplish eagerly. Death is an occasion that will come for sure."

…If I chose to escape, wouldn't I become an ingrate and heartless guy? I can't become that kind of person. Thus I make my mind up silently: I would live! To live well! Be a strong person at Beichuan High School! Since then, as if I became a different person, I started a new life.

This passage described a moral struggle after the disaster. The author lost the will to live due to loss of beloved ones. Her father's reaction "Your saying is to make me live in hell!" shows that the student's negative thought hurt him; it further reveals his vulnerability to any risk that threatens the integrity and solidarity of the family. So to speak, the strong, angry tone articulated by a father or a chief actually conveys their fear and fragility, that their selves are dependent on, and could not live without the specific others. Again, the student's social network became a moral authority that pushed her to face life with a positive attitude. She realized that the will to die is a moral failure that violates the expectation of society. On the other hand, she quoted a passage from a famous novelist that seems to be a philosophical contemplation about life and death,

confirming the sovereignty of God (in the Christian sense). This is a metaphysical thought, whose calm and firm tone contrasts with the angry tone of the father. In the ending of the quotation, the student seems to find a new meaning of life. She decided not to hurt the people who love her, and become a "strong person."

(iii) Re-definition of life

The last stage of existential struggle is re-definition and confirmation of the meaning of life. The two quotations below were written by a student and a teacher in Beichuan High School. They suggest that the survivors' lives carry the expectation of a larger community:

> Now I am clear that my life not only belongs to me…I carry on my shoulders the expectations of innumerable people whom I know and don't know…I will study hard, and dedicate my whole life to society and *zuguo* (home country). I am willing to do so no matter how hard it is. I even know that I am really lucky in this disaster. I would accomplish the dreams of those "buds" that passed away… (a student, p.73)

> We need to think this way, we live not only for the individual, but for many families, friends, teachers and classmates. We continue to walk the way they didn't finish walking. We continue to do things they didn't finish doing. We continue to enjoy the life they didn't finish enjoying. For them, we ought to live bravely…This is the best commemoration and comfort for them (a teacher, p.60).

These two passages define the individual's life as not one's own, but as carrying the expectation of the whole community. They especially convey a wish to finish the tasks that the dead did not finish. In this way they define their future lives as a substitute continuation of the dead who forever stay in the past. The dead transformed the meaning of the lives of the living, making them richer and larger than before the disaster, and imposing on them a moral burden that urges them to keep living in the face of sorrow and difficulty. From a cynical point of view, it seems to be a cliché. However, a cliché still

conveys symbolic meaning that reveals the way the society reconstructs itself after a huge loss.

Not all essays in the collection clearly mention or discuss existential issues as these passages do. Yet they represent a way in which people in the community think about life and death. The moral and collective tone shown in the passages is clear. Echoing Durkheim's differentiation of the individual and society, the struggle between life and death is a struggle between the individual and the social. The solitary, weak individual faces overwhelming damage, pain, and loss; he loses the strength to live and succumbs to death. However, the moral authority of the "imagined community"[41] – including the living, the dead, and the larger society (the whole country) – functions as an agent of social control or socialization, demanding that individual think and act positively. Through this mechanism, both the individual and the society regain their power and resume their lives.

Of course, many people really died in despair, yet no one blamed them. The dead could not to be blamed, since they had no chance to articulate anything, or no chance to think about anything at all when they died. It is the living – the rescued survivors and bystanders – who perform the discursive drama that reaffirms the socially-assigned value of life, in the form of dialectic between "will to die" and "will to live;" no matter whether they do so authentically or not.

Out of the texts quoted above, one can summarize the tension between orthodox and death discourse. The latter can be seen as a product of losing solidarity and meaning. The bodily or psychological suffering makes the individual surrender himself to death.

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[41] This term is borrowed from Aderson's idea (1991). I only use it in a literal manner, referring to one's imagination of certain community he belongs to. This imagination creates "virtual" collective effervescence in one's mind, and provides him with emotional energy and moral imperatives.

Contrarily, the orthodox discourse insists on the value of responsibility, social ties, and survival. It regards "die in despair" as cowardice and undesirable. When a will to die appears, the orthodox discourse shows up and makes a reaction, either from one's own inner voice (the first case) or others' voice (the second case). An "imagined community" might occur to one and generate moral imperatives, emotional energy, and a sense of solidarity inside the writers' mind. Both discourses may incorporate metaphysical thinking, such as "death is good" in the first case, and "life and death are in God's hands" in the second case. At first glance, the antagonism of "orthodox vs. death" discourse is a binary opposition similar to that of "orthodox vs. individualistic" discourse. However, these two antagonisms were of different nature. The individualistic discourse was a strong agenda that firmly advocated for rights and freedom. It applied the western tradition of individualism and liberalism as its intellectual resource. It also gained public support to a certain degree, and hence acquired recognition and legitimacy at the collective level (though far from a popular consensus). Contrarily, the death discourse presented above was only an individual articulation without social support and recognition. It was weak and easily defeated by orthodox discourse. There is hardly any public opinion that openly and strongly defends one's rights and freedom to accept or even seek for death[42].

Beside the binary discourse of "orthodox vs. death," there are other non-binary discourses as well. They respond to the problem of life and death with a soft, calm attitude that does not specifically assert what choice to make. The therapeutic discourse aims to guide the survivor, who lost the courage to survive, to regain meaning and

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[42] In the intellectual history, the most famous example is David Hume's *On Suicide* (1755) which justified the individual's right to commit suicide. This rationalistic view is certainly not widely accepted in the general public.

emotional energy. The acceptive discourse takes a detached, amoral viewpoint, accepting what one's fate brings to him, be it to live or to die.

(3) Non-binary discourses

Therapeutic discourses

Contrary to Durkheim's prediction, scholars found that in modern western society preoccupied by individualism, people tend to have more sympathy and tolerance for suicide, though not without reservations (Marra and Orrù 1991). At the same time, the professions of psychology and psychotherapy have treated ideation of suicide not as moral problem, but as a pathology that calls for a cure (Moller 1996).

After the Sichuan earthquake in China, many survivors expressed the will to die and the loss of meaning. Some even committed suicide. Although psychology and psychiatry have been developed in universities and medical systems in China, ordinary people, especially in rural areas, are not familiar with psychotherapy[43]. The state leaders recognized the importance of psychological health, and demanded the local government take care of the survivors' emotional and mental problems. A great number of scholars in mental health, counselors and therapists, and amateur volunteers, entered the earthquake zone to support people in need. In the beginning, most psychological interventions focused on students, children, and females. But many people who carried heavy burden and duty (public servants, school teachers, etc) received little emotional support. During the first year after the earthquake, two public servants in Beichuan county government committed suicide due to the loss of children and overwhelming work load. After that,

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[43] There is some literature in anthropology studying the historical development of mental health care system in contemporary China, along with the current trend of emotional problems, like depression, PTSD, and suicide. (Lee, 2011; Wu, 2011; Kleinman, 2011).

the government improved the staffs' welfare and alleviated their workload. They arranged short vacations and therapeutic programs for officials and staff[44]. These measures show the public's rising awareness of emotional problems, and their dependence (at least partly) on psychotherapy to reduce the "will to die" in local people.

Unlike authoritative imperatives that blame ideation of suicide or will to die as deviant, psychotherapy tends to use a friendly or soft tone to guide the client toward positive thinking. For instance, psychologists with the "humanistic approach," e.g., Carl Rogers, suggested that therapists should respect and accept the client with "unconditional positive regard." During fieldwork in Sichuan, I interviewed a psychological counselor who worked in Beichuan for four years. I asked him how he would respond to a survivor who expresses will to die. The counselor said:

> The goal [of therapy] is to discover the client's own strength. It is easy to respond. First, tell him that he is pretty strong at present: "If I were you, with families passing away, I couldn't have made it to live till now. What is it that supported you?" He would think of that he has a child whom he can't leave behind; and there are many people helping him and giving him hope. We reinforce these things…There are some taboos we can't say, including implication of death. We can't ask him: "If you die, whom did you treat fairly?"

According to this quotation, the counselor would respect the client and invite him to talk about himself, rather than teaching him what to do and what not to do. Through the client's self-disclosure, the counselor guides him to repair or re-strengthen the connection between him and the society, without strong moral imperatives. This technique takes moral dogma away from life/death choice, while it still functions to socialize the client and reduce his will to die, and thus can be seen as a "soft" form of social control[45].

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[44] The story of the first public servant who committed suicide, Dong Yufei, can be found Yang (2009) and Wang (2008).

[45] Unfortunately, I did not get the data about how the clients responded to the counselor's treatment.

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The therapeutic discourse's respect for the individual's self and emotion echoes the overall social trend of individualism. But it differs with individualistic discourse significantly. The latter calls for human rights, freedom, and search for truth. It is a social and political agenda challenging the status quo. Contrarily, the therapeutic discourse only seeks solution for the individual, while remaining silent on social problems, inequality, and repression. It is after all a kind of "service" under the medical system, not a critical social force.

Acceptive discourse

When I conducted fieldwork in Hanwang town, I interviewed local survivors, asking them how they thought about the meaning of life and death. There was a huge diversity in their responses, which demonstrates the richness of folk wisdom (I will deal with this topic in Chapter Six). Some people thought about it positively and wanted to do something meaningful. However, some others expressed a detached and tranquil attitude, emphasizing the reality that humans could neither control nor resist the coming of life and death. This idea is close to the concept of "fate." I list two quotations:

——Nancy (H14, F, 60s, low education, retired): One dies when one should die. One lives when one should live. Someday if I am killed [by disaster], so be it. You could not avoid even you want to avoid [when it is time], you could not die even you want to die [when it is not the time]. No matter how worried you are, things will happen. It's meaningless to think about them.

——Sherry (H15, F, 17, vocational high school, working out of town): As for death, Christians say it is fixed. If you are doomed to die, you couldn't change it. My friend said, some people don't die even after many car accidents. Some people die for one [accident]. Maybe, when time comes, let it happen naturally. I don't deliberately rebel against my life. Some people want to kill themselves, with an extreme mood. Don't be so. When time comes up, it comes up. Otherwise it doesn't come anyway.

Although they did not show a will to die, they did not have a strong will to confront the

coming of death, either. They yielded their life to fate or God. The second quotation has a religious origin that can be traced to a biblical text (*Ecclesiastes* 3:2). Given the fact that these viewpoints may be reasonable in certain sense, they probably could not be honored in the media and public sphere as a "mainstream" ideology.

These quotations did not necessarily imply that the speakers had a "passive" attitude toward their lives. The first speaker, Nancy, is an old woman having some physical problems. Both she and her husband relied on the social security pension offered by the government, which completely supported them. She was discontent with the resettlement policy, from which she felt her family lost more than they got. Yet she led a peaceful life (though with discontent and cynicism) and did not have any ambition to pursue any achievement or wealth. Her attitude toward life was just to accept whatever fate brought her. Sherry was a young girl who was about to finish her secondary education. She was inspired by outside volunteers (mostly college graduates from other provinces) through the years after the earthquake, and wished to pursue a good life in a big city. She has an outgoing personality and a rich circle of friend among many different places. Now she is working in Chengdu (the capital of Sichuan province) as a student cook in a hotel. Her talk about life and death, quoted above, was a peaceful acceptance of the uncontrollable power of fate. But it goes parallel with, and does not contradict her work and daily life in the real world.

To sum up, the acceptive discourses express either a detached or peaceful mentality. One surrenders oneself to the power of "fate" and does not propose a strong assertion or imperative about life/death choice. Hence it is distant from the binary opposition and disputes of "orthodox vs. death" discourse, or any kind of moral debate. I will revisit this

discourse in Chapter Six, which further examines the relationship between people's thoughts about life and death on the one hand, and their practical concerns and work in daily life on the other.

A summary of five discourses on life/death choice

This chapter examines the choices of life and death regarding the Sichuan earthquake, and different types of discourses related to them. The researcher finds that there are four types of life/death choice when the individual's will conflicts with the others' will. Meanwhile, there are five types of discourse concerned with the individual's life/death choice. The orthodox discourse poses a moral imperative in favor of "live for others" and "die for others;" while stigmatizing "die in despair" and "escape for oneself." The other discourses contrast or complement the orthodox discourse in different ways. In this section, I summarize how these differentiated discourses are involved in the four types of life/death choice.

The moral dilemma of "Escape for oneself vs. Die for others" is the antagonism between egoism and altruism (the difference between egoism and individualism should be clarified and kept in mind). The "duty" of school teachers complicates the issue, imposing moral burden on them to sacrifice themselves. The orthodox discourse honors the self-sacrificing teachers and makes them a symbol of altruistic virtue and "great love spirit." These teachers' stories are popularly quoted in post-earthquake literature. On the other hand, egoistic escape is condemned as selfish and shameful. It is on this issue that "individual discourse" came in, which criticizes the moral authority of collectivism, altruism, and other dark sides of Chinese society, e.g., the prevalence of "untruth." It advocates individualism (though not intellectually mature), upholding individual rights to

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save oneself when one is powerless to save others.

The existential struggle of "Die in despair vs. Live for others" is influenced by the degree of solidarity and meaning, which generates emotional energy and moral imperatives in the individual. Under the moral code of orthodox discourse, "Die in despair" is socially undesirable, and stigmatized as cowardly and shameful. The quotations presented above show that the moral imperative demanding that one live could manifest through one's inner voice an internalized form of social control. It could manifest through mutual surveillance between fellows in a community. Persons with high authority (like parents and teachers) are strong agents of socialization to articulate the voice of the society. In Chinese society, the power of family and the state is strong. It might be too naïve to say that Chinese people are conformist or collectivistic, yet public discourses often draw on a certain "imagined community" (the country, the party-state) to strengthen their agendas.

On the problem of "die in despair," the therapeutic discourse offers alternative techniques to deal with it. It respects and has sympathy for the individual's self and emotion and aims to reduce his will to die without authoritative moral tone. Compared with counter-official discourse, the former is a soft form of social control over the individual, which takes the mainstream belief for granted (i.e., man should live, not die), without challenging public opinion and political authority. The former is a critical force of "anti-control" that challenges the orthodox discourse, and pushes the public to reflect upon issues about truth and rights. The rise of both was embedded in the general trend of individualism, which conflicts with orthodox discourse in many ways.

Putting together the two sets of moral struggle, one could discover that it is not "live"

or "die" that counts. It is the problem of "for others" and "for oneself" that matters. Under orthodox discourse, the value of one's life lies in the others and the situation. In most situations, a community (a family, a school, or a nation) holds the "cult of the individual" and does not want anyone to die. One's "will to die," which occurs in great crisis, stress or pain, is socially deviant and illegitimate, because it threatens the integrity and sustainability of the community. On the contrary, when a situation demands one to sacrifice for others, things change. In such situations, one's escape for survival is at the expense of others' lives, and hence become undesirable. People with duty to protect others are expected to run the risk of dying, in order to fulfill the duty. Their sacrifice is valuable and honorable. As a consequence, people who want to die and yet chose to live (live for others), and those who what to live but chose to die (die for others) are socially sanctioned; since they conquered the individual's will or instinct, and chose to comply with the social norm or to fulfill the role expectation that has been internalized into their mind.

The last discourse presented here, the acceptive discourse, exists in the local layperson's real life world and is rarely seen in mass and press media. It shows a detached view that cares little about morality or meaning. It does not express a clear, strong will to live or die, and only follows the trajectory of fate. It is something outside the spotlights of public opinion, intellectual, and expert discourses; and perhaps represents a voice of folk wisdom that is under-discovered.

III. Conclusion

In this chapter, I adopt literature of cultural sociology on issues of body and action,

motivation and justification, as well as moral code and discourse. The data indicates that different moral problems involve different modes of decision making and discourse forming. The earthquake was a catastrophic event that created extremely life-threatening situations, in which the human body and life were in high danger or unendurable pain. In the dilemma of "die for others vs. escape for oneself," the individuals responded quickly based on either bodily instinct or deeply internalized cultural schema, which follows Haidt's and Vaisey's model of moral judgment. However, the *post hoc* discourses about the past choices, that is, the orthodox and individualistic discourses, were not merely "justification." They shifted from the individual's single action to the collective moral universals, launching debates about what/who is good or evil, a binary opposition (Alexander) or "culture war" (Hunter).

The dilemma of "survive for others vs. die in despair" was different. It was an ongoing struggle of bodily and mental suffering, rather than a one-time decision. As presented in the data, the moral discourses and the will to survive or die are intertwined as one integrated narrative, rather than separated as "judgment" and "justification." Echoing the dilemma of "die for others vs. escape for oneself," there was a binary opposition between the orthodox and death discourse. However, the latter was limited in the private, individual level, and could not gain public recognition, though it could probably gain much sympathy. That is because the mainstream ideology tends to repress or hide the voice of will to die.

The non-binary discourses contain much less moral imperative and emotional reaction. They do not contest other discourses, and rather take a pragmatic and peaceful position. The therapeutic discourse is a technique to guide the individual to regain meaning and

strength. The acceptive discourse poses a detached, morally neutral view about life and death, willing to accept whatever happens to one.

All discourses reviewed in this chapter are cultural repertoires mobilized to make sense of and solve moral problems in real life. The variety of discourse provides a rich pool of resource that the social agents could use to construct their own moral universals.

Chapter Three

The Past and Present of the Two Towns

This chapter depicts the general condition of the two towns, Hanwang and Beichuan, since before the earthquake until the time I conducted fieldwork there. I adopt the concepts of "vulnerability" and "resilience," to see the impact of the earthquake on the town citizens, and the way they recovered from the catastrophe and resumed new life. In literatures of vulnerability and resilience, both concepts have many different connotations, and even overlap at certain degree. According to Cutter et al's review (2003), "vulnerability" means either the conditions that make human beings or places vulnerable to disastrous events; or the conditions of the society to resist or recover from disasters; or both. On the other hand, Cutter et al (2008:600) summarize the definition of "resilience" as "the ability to survive and cope with a disaster with minimum impact and damage." In order to make a convenient distinction in my writing, I use "vulnerability" to refer to the pre-event conditions that make certain individuals or places more vulnerable than others to the disaster; and "resilience" the post-event conditions that influence the survivor's coping and recovery.

This chapter has three parts. First, I summarize the pre-disaster conditions of the two towns, and the way the government undertook the reconstruction after the disaster. I will focus on what the towns lost and gained in this process. Second, I classify survivors into different social categories, and sort out their post-disaster life trajectory and recovery. Third, I bring in the role of "cultural entrepreneur," that is, the local survivors who actively initiate a rich cultural life in the new towns. Through these observations, I single out factors that influenced the vulnerability/resilience of people and places.

Quite a few literatures already focus on causal factors of vulnerability, including socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, construction quality and density, family structure, and so on (Blaikie et al. 1994; Bolin 2006; Cutter, Mitchell and Scott 2000; Peacock, Morrow and Gladwin 2000). A couple of researches also stress the importance of local culture in disaster relief and resilience (Jang and LaMendola 2007; Jang and Wang 2009; Rabin 2005). In my research, I made an overall observation of how people in different social categories were impacted by the disaster, and how they moved on to lead a new life after the disaster. I single out institutional factors that mediated the disaster's impact upon individuals, including workplace, employment, age, and so on. I suggest that vulnerability and resilience are not simple, quantitative realities, which can be measured and judged as "high" or "low." Rather, people of different social categories face different situations and tasks, and have different accesses to outside resources. They differ qualitatively, and can hardly be compared on a uni-dimensional scale. Second, my fieldwork shows different logic of vulnerability and resilience. When one looks at the former, one could find that the tragedy of the two towns was indiscriminate. People in all social categories could not resist the overwhelming power of Nature. They were equally weak and little. However, when one looks at the latter, one could discover the survivors' agency, creativity, and efforts in the face of the loss, limits, and difficulties. In the following sections, I present field data in three parts: the past and present of the towns; the post-disaster recovery of people in different social categories; and the role of local "cultural entrepreneurs." As I unfold these dimensions of social reality, I demonstrate the agency and struggle of local society.

I. The past and present of the two towns

The local governments in China are organized by an administrative hierarchy, in which big cities manage small cities and counties; the latter further manages towns and townships. As shown in the chart below, Hanwang is administrated by Deyang City and Mianzhu City, which are at 45 and 25 minutes driving distance from Hanwang. These three places, along with nearby rural towns and villages, form a close economic and social connection. As for Beichuan County, it is administrated by Mainyang City, the second biggest city in Sichuan well-known for high-tech and nuclear industry. The county capital is Quchan town, often called "Old Beichuan" after the earthquake, distinguished from the newly built capital that accommodates the earthquake survivors. Both Hanwang and Old Beichuan were built alongside the Longmen Mountain area, which was the core site of the earthquake.

Administrative rank	Places	Places
Prefecture-level city	Deyang City	Mianyang City
County-level city / County	Mianzhu City	Beichuan County
Town	Hanwang	County capital (Qushan Town)

Both of the two towns were quite prosperous before the earthquake. However, their economy differs significantly. Now I present the stories of the two towns before and after the earthquake.

Hanwang: The influence of DTC[46]

As reviewed in Chapter One, the Old Hanwang had 58 thousand residents. Its economy

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[46] The description about DTC is based on interviews with three official employees of the corporation, along with supplemental sources, as noted in footnotes.

was supported by a state-operated business, Dongfang Turbine Corporation (DTC, often called "Dong-Qi" as a simplified name), along with other factories and mines. The DTC was established in Hanwang in 1966[47]. Its main business is to design and produce various kinds of electricity generators and related equipments used in power plants. After more than forties years of operation and development, its gross production output reached 20 billion RMB per year, and was the backbone of Hanwang's economy. I interviewed three official employers who have college degree and work on either coordinative or professional positions (H28, H30, and a couple H36); as well as two dispatched labor workers with lower education (H18, H20). The official and dispatched employees, along with their families, occupied approximately one third of the population in Hanwang before the earthquake (20 thousand people). They were major consumers of little businesses in the town, e.g., commodities, foods, services, entertainment, and so on. DTC also established primary school and high school in Hanwang. However, the official DTC members tended to have their own social circle based on the organization, relatively separated from other town residents. They have a slogan "Dong-Qi Spirit," upholding the ethos of brevity, innovation, and perseverance[48]. It shaped their organizational identity and solidarity since the early years, and was further affirmed and strengthened during the disaster relief and reconstruction.

The earthquake ruined lots of buildings in Hanwang, as well as some factory buildings of DTC, causing high casualties. However, the disaster relief showed the high resilience of DTC, compared with the rest part of Hanwang. Right after the earthquake, Hanwang

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[47] The official website of DTC: http://www.dfstw.com/
[48] Liu, 2009.2.26. "Revelation of 'Dong-Qi Spirit': On Dong-Qi Corporation That Did Not Fall in the Huge Earthquake." *Xinhua Net*.
(http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2009-02/26/content_10904217_4.htm)

lost contact with other cities. The DTC was the only unit equipped with satellite phone, which they used to call for outside support. Their affiliated corporations in Deyang City sent teams to do the rescue and relief work at the evening of the same day. In the next day, then, the Prime Minister Wen Jiabao came to show concern with Hanwang and DTC. Large rescue equipments were also brought in to rescue people trapped in buildings. According to news report, the death casualties in DTC reached five hundred people[49].

The earthquake damaged some factory buildings of DTC and made it impossible to resume the production in the original place. The corporation leaders transferred most employees and their families to Deyang City for temporary settlement. One month after the earthquake, DTC coordinated the resources of their branches and joint factories in Deyang, and resumed the production there. During the year 2008, they continued signing contracts with other industries, and created an output value that reached 88 percent of the original annual plan.

In order to avoid risk of earthquake in the future, DTC decided to leave Hanwang permanently, and built a brand new, more advanced factory site in Deyang. Due to DTC's move, as well as the decline of other factories, the economy of Hanwang shrank and could not return to the pre-disaster prosperity. In this sense, the reconstruction of Hanwang underwent a huge disruption and discontinuity.

Beichuan: Tourism and Qiang culture[50]

Beichuan County is a mountainous and rural place. People feed themselves by growing

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[49] Zhang, 2008.5.23. "Wen Jiabo Visited Hanwang Again: Dong-Qi could not be Crushed, Hanwang people were Heroes." *Chinese News Net*.
(http://big5.cntv.cn/gate/big5/news.cctv.com/china/20080523/105657.shtml)

[50] The summary of pre-disaster condition of Beichuan county in this section is based on the edited book General Condition of Beichuan Qiang Autonomous County (Feng, 2009)

wheat, corns, potatoes; and earn money by wood, tea, herb, and other economic crops. The government started to develop industry, commerce, and the construction of towns since the 1980s. In 1952, the county capital was moved to Qushan town, which is located in a mountain valley, with a river flowing by it. The town is surrounded by mountain from three sides. The government developed the foot of mountain since the 1990s, and posited the governmental buildings at the new lands.

Beichuan is also a homeland of the minority ethnic group, the Qiang. However, the Qiang people had been assimilated by the Han people (the majority of Chinese) since four to five hundred years ago. However, the CCP regime started the policy of autonomous administration of ethnic groups after it seized the power. Through several years of appeal by the local government since 1987, Beichuan County was successfully assigned as a "Qiang autonomous county" in 2003. It promoted Qiang culture in many ways, including: renovating the town buildings with Qiang style, teaching Qiang dance in schools, and host Qiang festivals every year.

The county also developed tourism based on natural landscapes and Qiang culture. An exemplary spot, Xiaozhaizigou National Nature Reserve, is famous for its forest, scenic sties, and authentic Qiang villages. In order to earn living under the policy of forest reservation, the local inhabitants renovated their own houses to accommodate travelers, and organized performances to entertain them. This strategy could attract 70 to 80 thousand travelers per year. Another famous spot is the former county capital, Yüli town, is claimed to be the homeland of an ancient legendary hero, Dayü, who managed the watercourses in order to mitigate the flood and save people. The town reserved temples, steles, and other relics that recorded the legend of Dayü.

The earthquake impacted the whole county. The most seriously damaged area is the county capital due to its geological location and high density of buildings. The state decided that the county capital could not be reconstructed anymore, and assigned it as a relic park. Meanwhile, they established a brand new town to accommodate the remained survivors. From then on, the damaged county capital is nick-named Old Beichuan, distinguished from the new capital, New Beichuan.

As presented below, the reconstruction of Beichuan county and the county capital maintains a continuity with their past (though definitely not a duplication of the past). The government cooperates with folk citizens to reserve and promote Qiang culture and tourism, with more effort than before the earthquake, in order to attract travelers from the whole country, and support the economy of the county.

The cases of Hanwang and Beichuan resemble and differ from each other in many ways. Most literature of vulnerability (cited earlier in this chapter) on disaster suggests that powerless people (female, aged, low status, ethnic minority) are exposed to higher risk of hazards than other people are. This thesis contains two levels of reality. The cases of Hanwang and Beichuan complement this common understanding of vulnerability at certain degree. The locations of the two towns are both earthquake-prone areas, that is, alongside the Longmen Mountain. However, the towns were not peripheral or poor in their economic and political status. Hanwang was prosperous for its industry, while Old Beichuan was a county capital. They are much more developed than the surrounding rural or mountainous villages. The decision of establishing and developing the towns in those risky areas can only be attributed to lack of knowledge, rather than lack of power. Second, the high density of buildings in the towns, the higher tiers (than rural houses) of the

buildings, and problematic quality of building construction, actually made the two towns more vulnerable to earthquake than their rural neighbors. As a result, due to the huge scale of the earthquake plus the factors listed above, the death casualty had no difference between powerful/rich and powerless/poor people. The most indicative sign of it is that several important buildings of the public sectors, including town governments, hospitals, banks, schools, and so on, seriously collapsed due to their closeness to mountainous area. However, as shown in the next sections, the post-disaster resilience of survivors differs.

The difference between Hanwang and Beichuan is due to their pre-disaster economic condition and post-disaster reconstruction. Hanwang was a small town supported by DTC, a large state-operated corporation. The latter had the ability to protect and pursue its own interest (in another words, it had better resilience). After DTC moved to Deyang to resume its business, the population and economic scale of Hanwang shrank significantly. Actually, the town fell apart, and the original inhabitants were separated into two places. As for Beichuan county and the capital, the damage caused by the earthquake was tremendously serious. However, their reconstruction reserved important elements that already existed in the past, that is, the development of tourism and Qiang culture. In the next sections, I depict the landscape of the new towns.

The grand planning dominated by the state

The central state invested huge material resources and thick symbolic meanings to build the new towns, as Prime minister Wen Jiabao stated: "We must build the Beichuan county capital as an exemplary construction, a hallmark of town-building engineering, a hallmark of anti-quake spirit and cultural legacy." The New Hanwang and New Beichuan were built on flat rural areas at certain distance from the old towns (that is, away from the

mountains). The New Hanwang is two miles away from the Old Hanwang. The New Beichuan is fourteen miles away from the Old Beichuan. The new towns accommodate both the survivors of the damaged towns, and the original inhabitants of the lands where the new towns were built on. The new towns occupied wider lands than the old towns did, and were carefully designed and quickly built up. The construction was finished by the end of 2010; and the survivors gradually moved to their new home in 2011.

The state imposed a grand and rich vision upon the reconstruction, especially of Beichuan. According to Wu (2011b) and Wu (2011c), 15.4 billion RMB has been invested to the construction of New Beichuan. The China Academy of Urban Planning and Design (CAUPD) was in charge of the planning and design of the town. They collected experts' opinions and made decision about the location, the scale, and the style of the new town. The Shandong Province, who is in charge of the relief and reconstruction of the whole Beichuan County, undertook the process of construction.

No I make a brief summary of the structure of the new town. Along the central belt zone of New Beichuan, there is a complex of symbolic building and landscapes. The first one is the earthquake memorial park, with a monument standing besides a wide square (below). The monument is engraved with a saying stated by President Hu Jingtao: "No difficulty could beat the heroic Chinese people."

Many cultural institutions lie around the north pole of the central belt, including the County Library, a museum of Qiang culture, a cultural center, a theater of performing arts, and a group of governmental buildings. Moving southward from the memorial square, there is a huge commercial zone "Beichuan Banaqia," composed of Qiang-styled architectures. In this area, there are stores, vendors, restaurants, and hotels. They sell Qiang-styled handicrafts, embroidery, food, services, and so on. The merchants come from within and outside Beichuan County.

The south border of *Beichuan Banaqia* is close to a river, on which there is "King Yü Bridge," named after the legendary hero, Dayü, representing the origin of Chinese history. The bridge is actually a commercial street across the river. (The photo below shows the entrance of the bridge.)

The residential apartments are also built with a grand scale. They are designed as modern six-tier apartments, with Qiang-styled decorations on the walls and roofs. The overall building style is highly unified throughout the whole residual quarters, with minor variation among different clusters. The photos below show the apartments of two different quarters.

Although Hanwang town does not have a tradition of Qiang culture, the logic of its planning and building the new town was similar to New Beichuan. The government plans to promote the historic sites, the Buddhist temples, and the earthquake relic park of the Hanwang area as a tourism attraction. Both of the new towns express a grand and rich vision, with the ambition to recover the economy by cultural and memorial tourism.

Besides tourism, the government also planned for industrial recovery. Since the local industries were severely damaged, the government established industrial parks in the new towns, and invited outside corporations, especially those from the counterpart provinces (Jiangsu and Shandong provinces) to set up quarters in the new towns, in order to create job opportunity for town citizens. However, this attempt has not yet resulted in significant success. Not many companies really came to the sites and launched production. Most of the factory buildings were still empty during the time of my

fieldwork.

The General living condition in the new towns

The population composition of the two new towns is complicated. As mentioned above, the current residents of the new towns come from two places. The first are the survivors from the old towns, who are "town citizens" (*chengzhen jumin*). The government collected their old houses and lands with a moderate compensation (However, many interviewees in Beichuan said they did not received any money). Their private properties remained in the old towns were no longer theirs, but state-owned properties as a part of the "relic park." On the other hand, the survivors had the exclusive rights to purchase apartments in the new towns. The size of apartment a household could purchase depends on the size of the household. In order to purchase the apartments, most survivors relied on loan, and then carried the burden of loan debt. The second group of people is original residents of the rural lands where the new towns were built on, who are "village citizens" (*nongcun jumin*). The rural villages suffered less severe impact of the earthquake than the towns, because of and low building and population density. In order to build the new towns on the designated spots, the government collected the farm lands, and then compensated the residents certain amount of money, based on the size of their lands and the value of their crops; as well as offered them new apartments in the new town for free.

When people moved to the new towns, their original social network was disrupted. They no longer live with their past neighbors, and have to find them and reestablish contacts through occasional encounters around the town. However, they also have chance to make new friends and form new social network. In New Hanwang, the former town citizens and rural natives are mixed in every residential quarter. In New Beichuan, the

two groups of people are separated. The town citizens are located at the west side of the central belt, while the rural natives are located at the east side.

Although the state imposed thick symbolic meaning and ambition on the reconstruction of the towns, materialized in huge space and remarkable buildings, the survivors of the damaged towns faced brutal economic hardship. They lost houses and properties in the old towns, and have to pay the loan debt for the new houses. And the economic condition of the new towns had not been successful (according to the residents' perception). Given the declined economy and price inflation (of food, commodity, and shop rent), it is hard to find a job or run a business in town, and those who have a job or business can hardly earn much money to accumulate wealth. People with low or no income receive monthly subsidy of "subsistence security" (*dibao*) [51] offered by the government.

With unsuccessful tourism, the population of people living in the towns is not adequate to resume economic prosperity. While the physical scale of the new towns is pretty large (much larger than the old damaged towns), the density of residency is lower than before, since many people died or moved out. Apart from the occasional events and daily public dancing (described in part III of this chapter), the towns are quiet and desolate for most of the time. Stores and restaurants seldom get enough customers. Many of my interviewees missed the good old days, the prosperity of the old towns before the earthquake.

In the next part of this chapter, I depict an overall picture of the survivors' ways of living, based on interview data gathered in the fieldwork.

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[51] This subsidy is regulated by the "Subsistence Security System," which guarantees the lowest living condition for all people. Those with low or no income are eligible for receiving monthly subsidy.

II. Diverse storylines of the survivors

In the next two sections, I summarize the interview data gathered in New Hanwang, New Beichuan, and adjacent rural areas, looking at the survivors' life trajectories, and their current material and emotional well-being. I sort out major types of narratives and types of social agents. Although the vulnerability of town citizens did not differ very much among powerful and powerless people, the resilience of them did differ. When analyzing the data, I look at the resilience of the survivors, and attempt to figure out the social factors that influence it. In this section, I present the survivors' major narratives in three dimensions: First, the temporal stages of the post-disaster resettlement; second, the social categories that mediated the impact of the disaster upon the individuals; third, the survivors' meaning-making about their life change caused by the disaster. These three dimensions represent the temporal trajectory, the objective conditions, and the subjective conditions of the survivors.

Temporal sequence of post-disaster resettlement

The post-disaster resettlement of earthquake survivors generally followed some types of storyline, which were shaped by institutional arrangements made by the government and other organizations. I first present a major trajectory shared by most town citizens of Hanwang and Beichuan. Then I present variations based on differences of place, organization, and individual. The major trajectory can be summarized in three stages.

(i) Right after the earthquake, survivors who safely escaped the collapsed buildings disparately searched for their family or colleagues. They spent the first few nights in relatives' places (in other cities), or in their cars, or in tents they set up on their own. Since the second day after the earthquake, the Liberation Army came to the towns. They

used heavy equipments to undertake the relief and rescue works. For survivors from Hanwang, the government established tent camps to accommodate the survivors from May to August. Survivors from old Beichuan were gathered in Jiuzhou and Nanhe Stadium in Mianyang City. (ii) The government built temporary housing camps as transitory resettlement places for the survivors since August 2008. The temporary house is called "*banfang*," meaning "house made of steel boards." Its structure is simple and thin, but is firm enough to shield the residents from rain and wind. The housing camp for Hanwang citizens was located in Wudu town, a rural land at ten minutes driving distance from Old Hanwang. The housing camp for Old Beichuan citizens was located in Yongxing town near Mianyang City. The survivors stayed in the temporary houses for more than two years, until late 2010. (iii) During the late 2010 and early 2011, the town citizens moved from the temporary camp to the newly built towns, which will be their permanent new homes. The previous section has introduced the planning and construction of the new towns.

Besides this major trajectory, there are variations as well. At every stage, people might have other options to settle themselves, based on differences in residence, organization, and individual conditions. (a) Difference in residence: The temporary camps and new towns mentioned above were built for town citizens of Hanwang and Beichuan, which suffered extreme devastation and could not be reconstructed anymore. As for adjacent rural villages and towns, the residents themselves built tents alongside their own houses. The government offered subsidies for them to rebuild or repair their houses. (b) Difference in organizations: Some work unit (*danwei*) were able to arrange their employees and families to settle in different places. For instance, since the DTC decided

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to resume the production in Deyang, they transferred their official employees together to Deyang, and helped them with the housing. I will talk about it later, regarding the resilience of *danwei*. (c) Individual differences: At every stage in the post-disaster resettlement summarized above, people who have sufficient economic or social resources might leave the original towns and move to other cities, like Mianzhu, Deyang, and Mianyang City, since the living condition in cities are better than the new towns.

Major social categories

Although the new towns were build with a grand physical scale, rich symbolic meaning, and vivid ambition for the future; the true situation of the residents is definitely not that bright and cheer. Since early 2011 when new Beichuan and Hanwang were built up, both towns have not yet attracted as many tourists, businesses, and factories as the town planners envisioned in the beginning. The population of people living in the towns is not adequate to resume economic prosperity. Both the job opportunity and business gains dropped down after the earthquake. However, the interview data presents a variety of living condition, based on the respondents' age, gender, employment, and other social characters. In this section, I summarize five types of survivors (whom I interviewed) based on their social positions and life situations. These social categories exist everywhere in modern society. They mediated the disaster's impact upon them, and the way they responded to it. I make a chart to summarize these categories, their ways of living, and the number of respondents interviewed in the field. (Some respondents shifted their categories after the earthquake. This chart only indicates their social categories at the time of interview.)

The data presented in this section demonstrates both "inter-categorical" variation

between different social categories, and "intra-categorical" variation inside each social category. For instance, people who were employed in work units relied on the latter for their livelihood. They differ from self-employed people, who were on their own to earn living and profits. However, the work units' capability of taking rescuing and resettling their employees after the earthquake also differs.

Category	Ways of living	Hanwang	Beichuan
Employed	The employees rely on work unit for livelihood. The latter also meditates their post-disaster recovery and resilience.	10	7
Employer and self-employed	They reply on themselves for livelihood and post-disaster recovery.	7	4
Student	They rely on the protection of adults, and are expected to study well for the future.	1	2
Housewife	They rely on husbands for livelihood, and carry the duty of child rearing. They might have free time to join or launch social activity.	7	3
Aged/retired	They rely on family and governmental pension; also have free time for social activity.	10	8
Others		1	2

(1) People employed by work units (*danwei*)[52]

The management and financial condition of a work unit decide the employees' earning and benefit. Similarly, when a catastrophic event occurred, the resilience of a work unit heavily influences the resilience of the employees. I presented some examples here. In the earlier section, I introduced the condition of DTC in Hanwang before and after the

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[52] Work unit (*danwei*) refers to governmental or private organizations that manage people's economic, political, and social life in China under the socialist administration. They are not only the "workplace" where people go to work. They control people's political loyalty, and offer benefits such as housing, insurance, pensions, and so on. Although their all-encompassing role has been weakened by the progress of marketization since the late 1970's, it is now still a significant factor that contributes to social stratification (Bian 1994; Bray 2005; Liu 2000; Walder 1986; Xie et al 2009; Xie and Wu 2008).

earthquake, which is an example of a corporation with strong resilience, being able to help their official employees settle down in Deyang and resume the routine work. As I have noted, DTC employees had their own social circle, and they altogether moved to Deyang, without severely breaking the continuity and coherence of their social life. However, the psychological recovery of the employees varied from person to person. For instance, Alice (H30, F, 33, college)[53], a white collar worker of DTC, lost her husband, also a DTC employee, in the earthquake. Later on, she married another colleague who lost his wife. She said that she still could not work through the sorrow. But she did not seek for help from psychological intervention, due to lack of access. Meanwhile, she filled her life with work, family, and reading. She dedicated her mind to the heavy workload, which prevented her from thinking too much about the loss of her husband. This case showed that the corporation not only secured her livelihood (job, earning, and resettlement), but also played a role in her emotional healing, though not through direct psychological consolation[54].

Other work units were not as powerful as DTC, and faced difficulties in the post-disaster recovery. Tianchi Coal Mine is a group company administrated by Deyang City government. The mine is on the mountainous area nearby Hanwang. It was once a profitable business. However, due to the decrease of mineral resources through time, its profits had been declined, making it classified as a "destitute business" (*tekun qiye*). The earthquake damaged the mine shafts, office buildings and dormitories, causing four to five hundred people die. I interviewed one of its chiefs, Willy, (H29, M, 48, High school) in charge of one of the mine shafts. He said that the company faces financial problems. It

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[53] The basic information of the interviewees is noted in this format: (Code, Sex, Age, Education level). The interviewees are referred to with English alias.
[54] I will talk about Alice again in Chapter Six, about how she looks at the meaning of life and death.

could not raise enough funds from the government, and could hardly complete the work of reconstruction. At the time of our interview, the company could not pay salaries to all its one thousand remained workers. It organized only two hundred workers to go to work. The other eight hundred workers were at home and received no salary. They relied on governmental subsidy for living. The leaders and workers were highly stressed with this financial difficulty.

People who worked in governmental and educational sectors, such as public servants and school teachers, tended to remain in the work unit and continued doing their works. Losing a job or salary was not likely to happen in these sectors. On the contrary, they faced high pressure of extremely heavy duty, due to serious casualties of colleagues, and their responsibility of participating in the relief work, and taking care of ordinary citizens and students. This duty could be very stressful, especially if one lost ones own family member(s), because they needed to handle their sorrow and at the same time offer service, management, and care to other people. As mentioned in Chapter Two, during the first year after the earthquake, two public servants in Beichuan committed suicide. Since then, the government put more care with the mental health of staffs and employees.

(2) Employers and self-employed people

People who did not work in a work unit, but did business on their own, relied on themselves to earn living and resume business after the earthquake. During my field work, I interviewed many employers and self-employed people. Some of them had been doing business before the earthquake; some others started their first business after the earthquake. Their businesses were of several types: barber shop, teahouse, fast food restaurant, medicine dealing, house decoration, construction, and so on.

Irene (H35, F, 56, elementary school) had been a businesswomen for many years in Hanwang before the earthquake. She sold clothes, commodities, cigarettes, and offered video rental services. She recalled that her family was not rich but fairly self-sufficient. It was easy to make money at that time. After the earthquake, she brought her family to the Mianzhu Stadium, the temporary shelter for survivors from the whole Mianzhu area. She was active in organizing business and activities for public interest. For instance, she summoned the survivors to install tents for others (because the Liberation Army was overwhelmed by other duties). The City government's cadre recruited her to join the Party, to facilitate further collaboration on the relief and resettlement works[55]. After moving to the temporary house camp (*banfang*) in Wudu, she found that there was no shower equipment there. She then raised 120 thousand RMB to build a public bathhouse.

Since the town citizens moved to the new town in late 2010, its economy had been bad, and Irene was eager to do something to improve the situation, in the face of the perceived impotence of the town government. She opened a karaoke house (where people sing songs for recreation) in 2012, in order to create job opportunity and stimulate consumption. She admitted that it was a painstaking task to raise money from different sources, and the reward of this investment was limited. The business of her stores was not good. She could only afford the employee's wages, and there was no surplus profit, not to mention the load debt she owed. However, she had a huge ambition about this career:

> At that time (when people stayed in the transitory camps), some people did nothing in the steel board houses, playing Mahjong all day long. They said that the Earth was going to perish in 2012, [one should] eat anything to be eaten, spend the money to be spent and don't save it. That was their idea. But for me, I always have my own goal to fight for. I am the most

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[55] In China, when there is a catastrophe or security issue, the government or army would recruit ordinary people, who are enthusiastic to provide assistance, to be Party members. It is called "frontline Party entrance" (*huoxian rudang*).

unsatisfied and ambitious person. I did business for many years, but those were all small businesses. I wish to expand my business. I also think that, I myself changed much through the earthquake. I wish to be famous, to become a famous entrepreneur, a famous deputy to the People's Congress, or something like that. I truly wish I can do that some day.

Irene was a special case who actively initiated plans and actions on public interest and local commerce. Her role in the town can be seen as a "local entrepreneur" who mobilized ones energy and resources to improve the town, no matter how successful the result was. Contrastingly, most of other people just tried to maintain their own business well. For instance, Alex, (B17, M, 32, junior high school) had been a barber and owned a shop in Old Beichuan. He once went to big cities to learn advanced skills and new fashions. However, he lost the shop in the earthquake. He then started a new shop in New Beichuan in summer 2011. According to his description, the government decided the shop rent (of all storefronts in the town) by competitive bidding, and thus made it high and become a burden for businessmen. At the time of interview, Alex still owed a loan debt of more than 100 thousand RMB, and his shop could create only four to five thousand RMB net profits per month. Every year he needed to borrow new loans to clear old loans. He observed that the reason lies in the low economic scale of the new town: There were not enough consumers (20 to 30 a day), while there were too many (more than 10) barber shops in the residential quarter.

Irene and Alex are cases who could manage to expand or maintain business in the face of economic difficulty (put the problem of profit aside). However, the worst situation could be being defeated by the property loss and no longer able restart business anymore. Chad (B07, M, 55) was an example. During childhood, he received little education and was forced to perform heavy labor work, due to the social turmoil of Cultural Revolution. However, in the reform era, he gradually developed his own career and wealth in catering

business and building industry. Right before the earthquake, he just completed building his own seven-tier apartment in Old Beichuan. He then recruited a construction team and traveled to Hebei Province (located in the northeast China) for a building work, in order to earn money and clear the debt he owed for his apartment. At that point, the earthquake occurred and damaged his apartment. He rushed back to Beichuan without starting that building work in Hebei. He lost almost all property and still carried a huge burden of debt. Up to the time of interview, he could not initiate any business again, because he had no funds to do it, and nobody (people and bank) was willing to help him. He could only earn living by doing waged, temporary labor work, plus the monthly subsidy (*dibao*) offered by the government[56]. At the same time, he needed to take care of aged people and juveniles in his family. He said that he would have committed suicide were it not for his Islamic belief.

Chad is a case that fell in a "vulnerable" situation. First, he invested all his wealth to physical properties, which was no longer accessible after the earthquake. And yet he still carried huge debt. It blocked the opportunity to initiate new business afterwards. Second, as a lowly educated people at middle age, he was not welcomed in the job market, and could only get hired as a temporary worker. These factors were not easily identifiable if there were no disaster, since Chad once owned good fortune. They came up together only because of the disaster – a contingent, unpredictable event – occurred.

(3) Teenaged students

Teenaged student is a social category whose expected goal is to study hard and make academic achievement. Their families and schools carry the duty of protect and take care of them. After the earthquake, they gained huge resources and care from the public, while

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[56] Since he was no longer a businessman, I classify him in the category "other" in the table presented earlier.

struggling with psychological wound and uncertain future.

The Dongqi High School in Hanwang, as well as Beichuan High School in Beichuan County, both suffered huge loss. The Dongqi High School once had 895 students; 314 of them died in the earthquake. The Beichuan High School once had 2,793 students; more than one thousand of them died. The survived students thus became a social group that drew much public attention and outside support. For instance, at least three professional teams went to Beichuan High School to offer psychological support for more than one year: The "Mind Garden" organized by Prof. Shen Heyong; the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Science; and the "Breakthrough" corporate from Hong Kong. Many state leaders (e.g., Prime Minister Wen) and celebrities also visited the school several times, showing their concern with the students, and trying to encourage and cheer them.

The (former-) students of Beichuan High School who experienced the earthquake were not easily accessible. I interviewed two of them, Lucy (B13, F, 21) and Dorothy (B20, F, 21)[57]. They were at 10th and 9th grade, respectively, when the earthquake occurred. Lucy's parents owned a restaurant in Old Beichuan. Her father died in the earthquake. Her mother then worked as a cook to earn living. After the earthquake, she was fairly depressed and felt life meaningless, basically due to her father's death. However, she met many voluntary groups and psychological support teams (e.g., the "Mind Garden") in the transitory campus. She joined their group activities, and talked with them, gradually regaining sanguinity. She worked hard for the College Entrance Exam, and was admitted to attend a normal university in Chengdu (the province capital of Sichuan). She relied on financial support from governmental and private sectors. She wished to find a job right after graduation, in order to share the burden of the family. She also stated that the

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[57] Dongqi High School in Hanwang transited to Deyang and resume the

outside supporters coming from the whole country inspired her, that she would not concentrate her attention solely to the small county capital, but rather tends do something for the public interest.

Dorothy's story was also highly related to outside support. Before the earthquake, her father has been retired; her mother owned a shoe store. They all survived after the earthquake. In the Jiuzhou Stadium, the temporary shelter for survivors from Beichuan, she joined voluntary groups to deliver materials to other survivors, and felt happy about it; though in her mind there was deep sorrow for losing so many friends. One month later, a corporation from Shandong Province[58] recruited students and children who lost parents, or those from poor family, to travel to Shandong and resume their study there. Dorothy joined this aiding program, because her family could not take care of her well at that time. Ironically, the experiences of studying and living in Shandong were not good. The students could not get used to the weather, the food, the high academic pressure, and the strict disciplines imposed on them. Although the program arranged counselors to the students, Dorothy was still depressed and took medicine for a while. After one month of staying in Shandong, the program sent the students back to Chengdu and arranged them study there. Dorothy felt much better since she returned Sichuan, and the school allowed more freedom. After graduating from high school, she attended a media college in Chengdu. Her mother expected her to earn money in the future to support the family's financial difficulty.

Not all students were as lucky as Lucy and Dorothy, who could manage to attend college. Dorothy witnessed that many of her schoolmates, who studied well before the

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[58] As mentioned in Chapter One, Shandong Province was responsible for supporting the reconstruction of Beichuan County.

earthquake, could not work through the impact of the disaster, and could not do well on the College Entrance Exam. The attitude of the parents and teachers is another problem. A psychotherapist who worked in Beichuan for four years noted that many parents felt that to live is good enough, and stopped to expect their children to achieve well anymore. Contrarily, some school teachers urged the students to study hard in order to fulfill the expectation of the state and the public. Many students themselves were not sure about what the meaning of studying is. Some could not even continue to study, due to financial difficulty of their families.

These problems show that although the students are under protection of adults, they actually faced multiple difficulties that complicated their attitude toward the future: Conflicting expectations from the school and family, the psychological wound, and the lack of meaning. On the other hand, Lucy and Dorothy show the influence of outside supporters, which could be perceived as positive (Lucy) or negative (Dorothy).

(4) Housewife

This category refers to middle aged, married women who did not go to work, but rather stay at home for taking care of household, especially their children. These people do not go to work or school. They depend on others (mainly husband) for livelihood, and dedicate themselves to family and children. In daily life, they might have free time to pursue their own interest and social activity. However, if a catastrophe takes their husbands or children's lives, it would be a highly painful situation to them.

I interviewed ten women in this category. Actually, seven of them did certain kinds of job or business before the earthquake. They stopped working because of loss of property, bad job market, and other personal and family concerns. Although they did not have a

"formal" job, some of them participated in various kinds of social activity, service, or part-time job. For instance, Rosie (H17, 30+, junior high school) ran a grocery store in Hanwang. Her husband worked in a logging headquarter. After the earthquake, they lost their home and store, and then moved to New Hanwang. Rosie once worked in a clothing factory. But she quitted later, in order to take care of her nine-year-old son. On the other hand, she was a faithful Buddhist. When nearby temples held religious events, she went to offer help[59]. The influence of disaster upon her family was mainly the loss of property and move of residence. But the dilemma between work and family (choosing one while sacrificing the other) is typical for most women in China, and perhaps in western countries, also, regardless of the occurrence of disaster.

Contrastingly, the stories of others showed great changes in their lives, such as Eve (H02, 36, junior high school). She had been a housewife living in Hanwang. Her husband was a truck driver and had good income. Unfortunately he got killed by the earthquake. She was shocked by the quake and the loss, falling into numbness, silence, and isolation, which are typical signs of psychological trauma. A Christian-based NGO approached, accompanied, and talked with her, and then introduced Gospel to her. They invited her to work as a cook for them, gradually recovering her sociability. The NGO workers established rapport and close relationship with her and her son. When I interviewed her in 2011, she said she wished to find a simple job that does not require thinking, since she felt headache when thinking. Later in 2012, a rehabilitation institution based in Shanghai recruited her to work in Hanwang High School, helping disabled students to do rehabilitation exercise, as a part-time job. This case shows both the impact of disaster, and the influence of outsides. Loss of spouse deprived Eve of economic and emotional

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[59] I will talk about her religious thoughts on disaster in Chapter Four.

support, making her unable to resume normal life. However, the outside supporters offered companion, consolation, and job opportunity. She felt that although she lost her husband, she gained more (friendship, job, and faith) after the earthquake.

Another issue about post-disaster recovery is loss of child. Child is the core of modern Chinese family. Most of my interviewees expressed great care about their children, in terms of education, health, and security. Loss of child causes huge impact not only on the couple's emotional well-being, but also on their future. They might want to have a new child, or otherwise, face a future without a child. In July 2008, the government launched a "Rebirth Service" project, offering health care counseling and service to assist couples who lost a child (or children) and wished to have a new child (Wang and Qiao 2009).

Three housewives I interviewed lost their children in the earthquake: Zoe (B14, 36, high school), Hannah (B15, 48, high school), and Wendy (B16, 39, junior high school). Take Zoe as an example, her life trajectory shows the responsibility of child rearing imposed on women, and the double influence of disaster. In early years, Zoe once worked as a substitute teacher, and got some licenses needed for a formal position. But she stopped working after getting married and having a child. Her husband was a miner. They bought an apartment in Old Beichuan on May 1st, 2008. At that time, she had two daughters of seven and one years old. Both were killed by the earthquake. She fell in deep sorrow, and did not accept any psychological counseling or lecture session. In 2010, she gave birth to a new baby, and gradually became more open-minded and friendly. However, she admitted that her expectation for having a job was quenched, since she needed to re-undertake the duty of child rearing from the beginning. And finding a job now is getting more and more difficult and requires more diploma and skill. She would

probably find a low skill job after her new child grows older. This case shows woman's sacrifice of career for child care. The disaster worsened this situation, that it further postponed the timing when she can rejoin the job market.

The three females I interviewed all concerned with problem of justice and responsibility regarding their children who died in school buildings. They appealed to the government to investigate the construction quality of the schools, and make due judge and compensation. I will examine this issue in Chapter Four.

(5) Aged and retired people

This group refers to those who are above 60 years old, or who retired from a job position[60]. If one purchased the social insurance plan (*shebao*), one is eligible for receiving monthly pension after retiring or attaining certain age. If one did not, then one is eligible for receiving the subsidy of "subsistence security" mentioned above. Their adult children also take the responsibility of taking care of them. The way aged people spend their time varies, depending on their physical health, financial condition, and personal interest.

A few of my interviewees were active in participating or initiating social activities, such as group dancing (Larry, H14), music band (Daniel, H16), and propaganda team (Tina, H08). I classify them as "cultural entrepreneurs" and will discuss them in the next section. Other people generally lead a peaceful life. For instance, a Hanwang citizen, Shaun (H10, M, 66, high school) worked as school teacher and businessman, and retired in 2006. At the time of interview, he and his wife received monthly pension of more than three thousand RMB, which was quite sufficient for the living expense there. Also, his

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[60] In China, people work in *danwei* are allowed to retire after 60 years old for male, and 55 years old for female. After retiring, one can receive monthly pension, which is covered by the social insurance plan.

wife (Tina, H08, discussed later) came from the village where the new town was built on, and hence could get an apartment for free. They did not have much financial burden, and could develop their own interest. Everyday, Shaun joined his friends to play mahjong and chess, and chat with each other about ordinary things. He also joined a "riding travel team for old people" (*laonian qiyoudui*), in which the members ride motorcycles to travel together. Shaun and Tina held a positive and gratitude attitude toward the government and reconstruction, thinking that they gained more than lost after the earthquake.

Some aged/retired interviewees were well-educated and could contribute their intellect to public affairs. For instance, Bill (H32, M, 66, junior high school) worked as managerial staff in many factories. He occasionally helped Hanwang's local governmental sector to do survey and activities. After moving to the new town in 2010, he helped to surveyed and registered the basic information of residents who came from Old Hanwang. When the town government set up a community library, he offered help to organize and shelve the books; and he worked another man, Frank (H34, M, 67, junior high school). The latter was once a secretary of a governmental sector, in charge of the taxing and management of local agriculture. In spite of being a Party member and public servant, he did not hesitate to share with me the problem of state policies, including the planning of reconstruction. An event further demonstrated his attitude. When the government announced the house price of the new town in the first place, it was a too high price for most survivors who just lost everything. Many town citizens mobilized to appeal to governments of superior levels, e.g., Deyang, Chengdu, and even Beijing. Frank helped to gather needed information, and shared opinions with those activists, although he himself did not join the appeal. Bill and Frank are cases that stood between

the state and the people. They had connection with the local government, and held an eclectic view upon it, neither blind gratitude nor radical criticism. They saw problems, and made suggestions to governmental sectors when they saw something need to be improved. However, they would not keep complaining and contesting against it.

Of course, the prerequisite that allows aged/retired people to engage in social participation is that they need to be in good health, and be willing to do so. For instance, Martha (B09, F, 58) was a restaurant staffer in Beichuan. Her husband was a governmental cadre in charge of integrity issue; but he died early. She relied on social insurance pension after retiring. Her children worked out of town, but still cared about her very much. Similar to all Beichuan residents, her house and properties were destroyed by the earthquake. The bad thing is that she got heart attack in 2012, and received a surgery at very high expense. Her children borrowed money from every accessible source to make payment, and then needed to work hard to clear the debt afterwards. Afterwards, Martha still needed to take medication chronically, and it caused a financial burden upon the family. She also retreated from social networking since she was afraid of getting sick out of home. However, in our interview, she shared much observation and critique to Beichuan town citizens, including governmental staffs and their families, in terms of their lack of moral integrity. This attitude was related to her Islamic believe, and I will talk about it in Chapter Four.

The interview data of aged/retired people presented above shows that they are not weak or inactive at all. Rather, they led a rich life in different ways. Without the duty of doing waged labor, they actually had free time to participate in, or launch social activities. I will show more about it in part III of this chapter. Before that, I make a brief discussion

about the problem of resilience for people in different social categories.

Discussion

The data presented in this section makes a thorough picture of the life trajectories and post-disaster recovery of survivors in different social categories. It demonstrates both "inter-" and "intra-" categorical variation. Each category deals with a specific ways of living, in terms of employment, gender, age, and so on. These systemic factors create different resources, limits, and goals surrounding the survivors. They further shaped the way in which the survivors respond to the loss and resume their life.

People who worked in *danwei* (work units) relied on them for income and benefits. A strong and privileged *danwei* like DTC would take care of its employees to work through the hard time, at least in terms of material and financial support, and secured job position. A weak *danwei* could hardly do so, and even break down in itself. At the same time, the employees were expected to work hard to resume the business of the *danwei*. Public servants especially carried the duty to organize and participate in the relief work, to offer service for citizens, although they themselves also suffered from great loss.

Self-employed people and businessmen basically relied on their own, either to restart business or give it up. Most businessmen lost their original business in the old towns. However, their ability and ambition to restart business varied. There were local entrepreneurs like Irene who mobilized accessible resources to start new business. Some ran bankruptcy and had difficulty earning living, like Chad.

Students were protected by the family and school, and received great care from outside NGOs and psychological professions. Yet the quality of outside support was not even and guaranteed, as shown in two contrasting cases (Lucy and Dorothy). Also, they still

needed to study hard for their future. Those who could not recover from trauma might fail in academic achievement.

Housewives and aged people relied on others (husband) or the state (insurance pension) for their living. Housewives also carried the responsibility of child rearing. Although they seemed to be powerless and dependent, their "free time" actually allowed them to join or initiate social and cultural activities, as further presented in the next section.

These findings show that every social category had certain advantage and constraints that other categories did not have, which is the "inter-" categorical variation. On the other hand, inside each category, there were people who "did well" and "did badly." It is the "intra-" categorical variation. This framework could provide a holistic picture of the town citizens.

III. Local cultural entrepreneurs

As mentioned above, the economic recovery of the towns was not yet successful (as perceived by the survivors). However, the cultural life of the town citizens was not silent. A significant part of local society that demonstrated people's agency and resilience is the "cultural entrepreneurs," who made effort to maintain or promote local culture in various forms, in order to revive the towns. The cultural practices and objects they adopted basically came from pre-existing tradition and daily life. Their effort showed both continuity and innovation of local culture, that underwent rebirth after the disaster. It also belongs to the "culture boom" I proposed in Chapter One.

In this part, I summarize three kinds of cultural entrepreneurs and their cultural practices: institutional cultural producers, folk artists, and daily recreation. They are

distinguished by the degree of institutionalization and professionalism. They work in different social space, and carry different cultural meaning for the town citizens.

(1) Institutional cultural producers

Institutional cultural producers attempted to preserve and promote traditional culture with professional standard and organizational management. They proliferated in Beichuan because of their ethnic legacy, the Qiang culture. As reviewed above, the local government had been making effort to preserve and promote Qiang culture for a long time, making it as a symbol that represents the identity of the county. The disaster damaged many important places and objects related to Qiang culture. The cultural elites[61] (of Qiang origins) felt great need to save and reproduce it with more effort. They mobilized accessible resources and connections to establish full-time organizations for cultural production. Many of them gained support from the government and the media, thus acquired high visibility in the general public. I introduce two of them here.

Beichuan Qiang Dance Artistic Team is one of the most emblematic examples. Its leader, Yang Huawu (M, 50)[62], was from Qingpian Township, a Qiang community located in a mountainous area in Beichuan County. He once worked on management, business, and then became a village cadre. Since 2002, in order to improve the village's economy, he started to develop tourism based on authentic Qiang culture and lifestyle[63]. He organized the villagers, who were master in Qiang art, to perform dances and music as entertainment for tourists. This strategy made success. The earthquake damaged the

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[61] The "elite" mentioned here means people who are master in, or familiar with, ethnic/traditional culture, and make efforts in the professionalization and institutionalization of it. However, their origins are not so much distant from "ordinary" people. In this context, one does not need to associate this term with a clear and strict social hierarchy.

[62] I myself made an interview with him. Other information can be seen on news coverage, such as Zhou and He (2011).

[63] The term "authentic" has been under reflection and critique in academic circle. However, this issue is beyond the scope of my dissertation. I mentioned it only as a narrative articulated by local people like Yang.

village, and the survivors went out to make a living. Driven by sense of responsibility to preserve the diminishing Qiang culture, Yang determined to re-establish the performance team. He said: "If an ethnic culture disappears, I think it is the disappearance of this ethnic group." He gathered old members, and recruited new, young people from many counties, and finally the team in June 2008. It got financial support from Shandong province (the counterpart aiding province for Beichuan). The new team has been constantly making performance in important holidays and festivals, in public space inside and outside Beichuan, and gained national visibility. In order to pursue variety and innovation, they also incorporated elements of modern art and popular culture into their repertoire.

Another example is "Beichuan Embroidery Lady" (Bechuan xiu niang) dedicated to Qiang embroidery [64]. The founder, Zhang Guixi, learned Qiang embroidery since childhood. After the earthquake, she was resettled in temporary tents, and sought for consolation in embroidery. One of her unfinished work made at that time was later displayed in an exhibition. It caught a Taiwanese collector's attention, and he bought it. This inspired Zhang to promote Qiang embroidery to broader audience. With support from private investment and governmental arrangement, she established a company, working in the form of "corporation plus peasantry," in which 86 full-time workers led 500 peasant households to produce several kinds of embroidery products, e.g., clothes, handicrafts, and ornamentations. and keep developing new techniques and themes. The

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[64] I visited their exhibition center located in *Beichuan Banaqia*, and also gathered information on news coverage:
Sichuan News Net. 2012.11.15. "Beichuan Embroidery Lady Zhang Guixi: Creating Industrial Miracle while Not Forgetting the Grace of the Party."
(http://scnews.newssc.org/system/2012/11/05/013662546.shtml)
He. 2012. "Beichuan Embroidery Lady's Dream of Passing Down." *Sichuan News*.
(http://scwx.newssc.org/system/2012/06/11/013545627.shtml)

corporation received orders from around the country, and created a revenue more than 10 million RMB during the first year. The workers are mostly females who are master in the art form. They experienced loss and suffering caused by the earthquake. Working on embroidery could provide them new meaning of life, as well as income.

These are two examples of cultural production that attempted to preserve and promote ethnic culture after catastrophic devastation. As summarized above, Beichuan County already had the policy of Qiang culture preservation long before the earthquake. The earthquake damaged lots of cultural sites, objects, and people themselves. The cultural elites felt a need to recover their culture, as a means to maintain the cultural identity of the ethnic group and the county as a whole. Meanwhile, the also drew attention from the outside society, including the government, the private sectors, and the mass media. These powerful agents offered support to local elites to establish their career and cultural industry. In this sense, the cultural entrepreneurship and its effort in cultural revival were actually collaboration of local society and general public.

(2) Folk artists

In Beichuan and Hanwang, as well as many other places, the local governments either sponsored or organized occasional cultural activities, such as art performances, competitions, and holiday events. The performers include semi-professional artists and amateur groups. They are what I call "folk artists," the civic voluntary groups dedicated to art performance, such as music and dancing. They are local ordinary people from middle and lower strata. Most of them were age/retired people or housewives, because young people tended to leave the town and work outside. They received certain training of folk art in early years, and were capable of making performance when there was an

opportunity.

For instance, a Hanwang resident Daniel (H16, M, 66, elementary school) was a peasant living nearby Old Hanwang. In the past few decades, he and his son opened a computer and photocopy store; their customers were basically DTC employees. When he was young, he once joined "art team" (*wenyidui*)[65] and learned several kinds of traditional performing arts, including *banhu* (a string instrument), *kuaiban* (a speech art with fixed rhythm), and dancing. After the earthquake, he organized a traditional music band in 2011, saying: "There has been a regression in economy, and we shall not have a regression in thoughts and spirit. You must stand firm by yourself. Do not be passive due to the earthquake…do not let others look down upon you." Based on this motivation, he reactivated his knowledge of folk art, to cultivate a "professional" (claimed by them) band to elevate the cultural life of the town. The musicians are mostly retired people living in Mianzhu and Hanwang. The band basically performed in formal occasions such as important holiday and festivals.

Another case is Tina (H08, F, 60, elementary school, spouse of Shaun). She came from a rural village, and did grocery business in most of her life. After the earthquake, she wished to express great gratitude toward the state, the Party, the outside supporters who helped the survivors to reconstruct their home. Then she established a propaganda team (*xuanchuandui*)[66], composed of housewives and aged people, using traditional art form to deliver messages of gratitude and morality (I will introduce her pieces in the next chapter). Although she only received one year of primary education, she was able to

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[65] *Wenyidui* is a kind of organization in Chinese folk society dedicated to performing arts.
[66] The form of a "propaganda team" is similar to that of "art team." They perform all kinds of traditional folk art, e.g., music, dancing, small drama, etc. The term "propaganda" emphasizes the purpose of the team, that is, to promote certain moral teaching, political agenda or ideology.

create lyrics for *kuaiban* pieces on her own. Her team basically performed in religious events (*miaohui*) held by Buddhist temples around Hanwang area.

Daniel and Tina are cases that showed the cultural energy of folk society. Although they were not well-educated, they could engage themselves in art creation and performance, and had ambition to influence the local community.

 (3) Daily recreation

Public dancing is a popular recreation held in public space in most Chinese cities and towns, including Hanwang and Beichuan. My interviewee, Larry (H14, M, 77), had been a dancing organizer for several years. He lived nearby Old Hanwang before the earthquake. He learned the fashion of group dancing from town citizens, and then organized it by himself everyday on the DTC front square. The way he (and other organizers) did it was fairly simple. He prepared the equipments (electronic music player and speakers) by himself, and played the music at fixed places and fixed time everyday. People would come around and start to dance[67]. Some people stand aside and just look at those who dance. It naturally became a routine by which people spent leisure time. After moving to the new town, he continued to organize dancing in open spaces regularly. He said that it was an exercise, and an occasion of social connection.

Another case, Diane (H13, F, 43, elementary school), has more personal affection with this activity. Before the earthquake, Diane lived in a rural area, where New Hanwang was later built on. Her brother's family lived in Old Hanwang. Her niece, Nina (alias), learned dancing since childhood. She is master in several kinds of dance, and won many awards. Nina's mother died in the earthquake, when Nina was eleven years old. Diane then took

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[67] The music played for dancing includes various genres, depending on the taste of the organizer and people who join the group. Most of them are fast-paced popular songs. Dancing in Beichuan naturally makes use of Qiang music, as well as other kinds of music.

care of Nina just like her own daughter, and wished to support her to become a professional dancer in the future. Since late 2010 when the construction of the new town was completed, Diane started to organize public dancing every evening, and let Nina teach the beginners how to dance. Similar with many other interviewees, Diane had lots of idea to improve the town's economy. She arranged the dancing to be held on the town's commercial zone, in order to increase people who come window shopping. Without this regular gathering, she said, the town at night would be desolate like a ghost town. As mentioned in Chapter Two, when I interviewed her in early 2012, she thought that life is meaningless, but she felt happy about this social activity. However, the endurance of the activity is uncertain, and things may change all the time. In late 2012 when I revisited the town, she no longer held the dancing. Instead, she loaned much money and opened a dancing classroom, letting Nina to teach students.

The public dancing described above can be seen as daily, ordinary recreation in normal time. However, for a community which underwent serious devastation, and had not (probably will never) returned to its past prosperity, this activity meant more than that. It became one of the few collective rituals that maintained the residents' coherence, and the constant existence of the town as a community.

Cultural continuity in different forms

The three types of cultural entrepreneurs attempted to revive the towns through cultural practices and objects. They all sought for "continuity" of the town's cultural and communal life, by means of restoring and promoting either folk art or collective event. The difference between the three types of cultural entrepreneur lies in the degree of institutionalization and professionalization, and the cultural meaning of their practices

and works. The "institutional cultural producers" were full-time artists working under formal organizations. Although the social origins of artists of this type were not so different from other types, they aimed to pursue high artistic skill and tastes, and were able to promote their performance or products to the wider society. Meanwhile, the "folk artists" were basically amateurs with uneven performing quality. However, they were capable of producing texts and works with clear idea in mind. They performed in special occasions, aiming at local audiences. The last type "daily recreation" is actually not "art" in strict sense, but a collective form of leisure activity, performed by ordinary town citizens. The dancing organizers brought back the past of the old towns to the new towns, to maintain a vivid collectivity.

IV. Conclusion

This chapter depicts an overall picture of the life world of Hanwang and Beichuan town. I examine the vulnerability and resilience of the places and people living there. I suggest that there is no significant differentiation of vulnerability inside the two towns. All people in the towns were highly vulnerable to the disaster, due to the location of the towns, the density of buildings, and the problematic construction quality. However, the post-disaster resilience did vary among different social categories.

Previous researches on vulnerability and resilience tend to measure the two factors as uni-dimensional variables that vary among social strata and social groups. Their findings often emphasize on the influence of inequality and power relation. My fieldwork complements with this model by displaying the "inter-" and "intra-" categorical variation of five social categories, including: employed workers, self-employed, students,

housewives, and age people. I find that each social category had its own advantage, limits, goals, and difficulties. They vary qualitatively and could not be reduced into a uni-dimensional scale. It is true that people in advantageous positions (e.g., working in big corporation like DTC) are likely to benefit more in post-disaster resettlement. However, people in seemingly powerless categories (lower-educated, housewives, aged people) still have their own channel of deploying agency and seeking for revival, such as cultural entrepreneurship.

Although the state imposed thick and grand symbolic meaning upon the reconstruction of the towns, not all citizens appreciated its planning. They struggled with the brutal reality of regressed economy and heavy loan debt. At this point, some of them sought to revive the towns' economy and culture in their own way. This entrepreneurship shows the survivors' agency and ambition to maintain the continuity of the towns' legacy and communality. It is also an exemplary expression of the local society's post-disaster resilience in a broad sense.

Chapter Four

Meaning-making about Disaster:

Political, Religious, and Psychological Approaches

Suffering is not something that has a fixed essence of its own. It is shaped by cultural milieus and social institutions. As Levinas' term "useless suffering" (1998) indicates, it is not the brutal fact, the negative experience of suffering *per se*, but the uselessness and meaninglessness of it that trouble people the most. Suffering without meaning is cost without benefit[68]. In response to this tension, human society develops "theodicy,"[69] that is, discourses dealing with causes and meanings of suffering: Why is there suffering? Why me? Who did it? What is the purpose, the meaning, or the benefit of it? People need answers for these questions to make suffering tolerable and sometimes enjoyable. As we shall see, theodicy accounts not only for disaster, but also for human society and human behavior. It is further linked with the problem of "salvation," concerned with how people transcend or get rid of suffering and reach the path of redemption. The original use of the term "theodicy" refers to religious thoughts. But its logic can be applied to non-religious thoughts as well. In my writing, I use it in a broader sense, referring to both religious and non-religious discourses that explain the origin and meaning of suffering, by which the victims can regain a sense of security and control, and become capable of enduring suffering.

Based on literature and data reviewed later in this chapter, I assume three basic features of theodicy. First, I construe theodicy as a cultural practice that attempts to

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[68] As a counterpart of "useless suffering," there is "useless violence" as well. Primo Levi (1989) used this term to describe Holocaust, a violence "as an end itself, with the sole purpose of inflicting pain, occasionally having a purpose, yet always redundant, always disproportionate to the purpose itself (p.106)."
[69] This term was created by Leibniz in a theological debate concerning the 1755 Lisbon earthquake.

establish meaning and order in the face of suffering, through which the society and individuals could regain a sense of security and control over nature and human beings. Second, theodicy is not merely "thoughts" floating in the air. It is embedded in the empirical situation and social relations, and able to generate social actions. Based on certain versions of theodicy, agents in given social positions form expectations for themselves and others, concerning the problem of responsibility and moral discipline. Third, different worldviews, including the scientific and religious ones, generate different versions of theodicy. Also, as summarized above, the content of theodicy actually contains many different questions, and different social agents might ask different questions, and expect or create different answers.

After the Sichuan earthquake, the society responded to the damage and loss in different ways. I group them into three threads, summarized in the chart below. The first thread is the responsibility of the state in disaster vulnerability and reconstruction. People who lost their family members, especially school children, were eager to seek justice and compensation. The state repressed this voice. However, it invested huge resources in the relief and reconstruction work, and celebrated the achievements it made. This antagonism touched the issue of "performance legitimacy." The second thread is religion as an institutional source of theodicy. People with religious beliefs adopted religious discourses to explain the meaning of disaster. They generally linked the disaster with God's will and people's moral conduct. Some of them even launched agendas of religious preaching. The third thread is psychology, which helps people face suffering with professional techniques. It generally takes an individualistic and scientific approach.

The mechanism of theodicy is also a mechanism of social control existing in certain

social spheres. The first thread of meaning-making occurs in the public and political sphere, in which the state and the civil society conflict on the issue of responsibility and legitimacy. They represent attempts of downward and upward social control from the two sides. On the other hand, the religions and the enterprise of psychology are institutional sources in the civic society that offer cultural repertoires for horizontal control and self-control. They occur in the civil and private spheres of the social space.

Meaning-making	Location in the social space	Discursive content	Social control	Form of knowledge
Responsibility and legitimacy of the state	Public (political) sphere	The civil society questioned the responsibility of the state on building quality.	Upward control	Scientific knowledge, Sociodicy
		The state maintain its legitimacy by grand achievements of reconstruction	Downward control	
Religious meaning-making of disaster	Public (civil) and private sphere	Religious theodicy explains the disaster by concepts of karma, deity, and moral conduct.	Horizontal control Self-control	Religious discourse
Psychology of trauma and recovery	Private sphere	The profession of psychology adopts several kinds of therapeutic technique to help victims cope with trauma.	Horizontal control Self-control	Cognitive/behavioral science

This is definitely not an exhaustive list. However, the three threads are related to institutional channels of meaning-making. The state, the religions, and the enterprise of psychology are "carriers" of specific cultural resources and ideology. They responded to the disaster, and interacted with the survivors in different ways. The goal of this chapter is to generate a systematic research, by means of empirical data, to establish a holistic

picture of the social distribution of theodical meaning-making. In this framework, one can compare the logic of different types of theodicy, in terms of (i) the symbolic content of each type of theodicy; (ii) the mechanism of social relation, social control, and social conflict involved in theodicy.

First, I review existing literature on theodicy in general, which demonstrates the diversity of theodicy, and implies the linkage between theodicy and social structure, social action, and politics. And then I present three threads of theodicy, or generally speaking "meaning-making" of disaster. The data unfolded here implies the diversity and uncertainty of meaning, and that each thread of theodicy has its own strength and limits. None of them could provide a universal solution to disaster for all people.

I. Literature review

Historical context

Humans have contemplated the meaning and value of suffering since earliest times. A Chinese philosopher, Mencius (372-289 BCE), said that "When Heaven is about to place a great mission on a man, firstly it would frustrate his mind, exhaust his muscles, starve his body, deprive him of properties, disturb his endeavors; so as to inspire his spirit, toughen his temper and enhance his abilities." It treats suffering as a trial imposed upon the predestined person, to strengthen his body and mind, so that he can make a great contribution to the world. In this sense, suffering has a positive meaning, as a moral expectation for the individual. Many studies (Das 1997; Kleinman 1997; Morgan 2002) show that traditional societies tend to connect pain, illness and death with moral, social or even religious meanings; hence the subjects know "how to suffer" and are capable of

enduring the suffering. Contrarily, modern society, dominated by science and technology, tends to treat illness and pain as merely biomedical problems which should be avoided and cured, without paying attention to the substantive experience of suffering. Hence people do not know how to make sense of and endure suffering.

Weber is an important pioneer in sociology who dealt with issues of theodicy. His works (1978, 1963, 1958a, 1958b) provided a typology of theodicy in different religions, analyzing their social and historical contexts, the various ways by which theodicy explains the origin and function of suffering, along with the hope of salvation, and the practical effect of theodicy on believers. The historical evolution of the logical forms of theodicy is in line with the progress of rationalization, driven by the "imperative of consistency" (1958a:324), such as the problem of how a transcendental god may be "reconciled with the imperfection of the world" (1963:139). Through this reasoning, theodicy could function as an ideological tool that legitimizes not only physical pain and illness, but also social inequality and power relation, for people in both high and low strata, hence maintaining the *status quo*.

For people under political pressure, a messianic eschatology could promise a "just equalization" and salvation for them in the future. In some other theodicies, suffering is connected to ethical life and self-discipline, e.g. rejecting this-worldly pleasure could avoid punishment incurred by ethical divinities. Lastly, the Buddhist idea of "karma" suggests that the individual's ethical behaviors cause later consequences in the successive incarnation of one's soul. Unjust suffering is seen as atonement or compensation for one's evil action (Weber 1958b, 1963). However, the progress of rationalization in religion and in the whole society gradually decoupled religion from other spheres of the

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world. Religion was then rendered as irrational, incredible and could no longer provide a meaning of life shared by the general public. Meanwhile, the science and culture, known to the general public, also became "senseless as a locus of imperfection, of injustice, of suffering, of sin, of futility (1958a: 357)." The society has become devoid of a common version of theodicy that can answer the questions about suffering.

Influenced by Weber's interpretive paradigm, Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) devoted a chapter to theodicy. He listed different types of theodicy on an irrational-rational continuum, an elaborate framework supplemental to Weber's writings. Berger noticed that theodicy works to satisfy the individual's "need for meaning" of both suffering and happiness, serving to legitimize and maintain social order and inequality. However, the plausibility of Christian theodicy has been declining through the past few centuries. Since World War II, people have almost lost faith in God, and turn to human action instead, laden with politico-ethical questions about justice, to seek the explanation of suffering.

On the other hand, Geertz (1973) noticed the issue of suffering in his study of religion in non-western societies. He looked at how a primitive society copes with suffering (sickness) through a collective ritual of singing, which provides a meaningful context and vocabulary to express the suffering and helps the patient "resist the challenge of emotional meaninglessness raised by the existence of intense and unremovable brute pain (p.105)."

Facing the immense suffering and atrocities in the twentieth century, contemporary writers continue to reflect upon the question of theodicy. Levinas (1998) observes that the two world wars, the genocides and the totalitarianisms during the century have caused

"the destruction of all balance between Western thoughts explicit and implicit theodicy and the forms that suffering and its evil are taking on…(p.97)" Due to the decline of theodicy, modern society directly faces the tension and inconsistency inherent in the problem of suffering. Following Weber's writings, Morgan and Wilkinson (2001) and Morgan (2002) point out some aspects of the tension of suffering. First, the progress of rationalization and disenchantment types the questions about value, meaning of life, transcendence and sublimation as irrational and puts them into the private sphere. Hence there is no powerful, shared set of discourses able to make sense of suffering. Second, along with the high degree of rationalization which achieved great progress in economy, sciences and other areas, we also see severe chaos, atrocity and violence caused by irrational forces. The inconsistency between the rational and the irrational, between ideal expectation and brutal reality, become more and more sharp and intolerable.

Perhaps the intolerability of such inconsistency is due to the fact that we are too confident in the extent of rationalization, and neglect the fact that human actions are still driven by irrational impulses and emotions. The progress of the enlightenment and disenchantment is always limited and could never be completed. We also may have made a false, utopian expectation that the world functions in a way that favors the well-being of human beings. The truth is that the mechanism of nature does not favor humanity; and the logic of human society does not always successfully eliminate suffering. Sometimes it creates it, or even worsens it. To deal with suffering caused by human actions, Morgan and Wilkinson (2001) introduce the term "sociodicy," urging sociology to uncover the social, political and economic process that generates human suffering. As reviewed in Chapter One, the agenda of "sociodicy" is in line with disaster researches which examine

role of human beings in the emergence and impact of suffering. In this sense, the problem of inequality and power relation would be revealed and critiqued.

Variety of theodicy

As we shall see, there are numerous versions of theodicy throughout human history. It varies by worldviews or ontological paradigms, e.g., scientific, moral, religious, and so on. Even a single religious tradition might offer different accounts of suffering (as shown in the section on religious discourse).

In western history, the 1755 Lisbon earthquake invoked diverse reactions and debates in the European public sphere, already fully committed to an Enlightenment movement that sought more control over nature and society (Chester and Duncan 2010; Min 2010; Neiman 2004). For instance, Leibniz defended God's justice by claiming that the real world is the best possible one, and the sufferings in it are caused by humanity's moral sins. Kant took a scientific view, suggesting that the earthquake was caused by the natural order, and its main benefit was the knowledge that the world is not made in our favor. As a pioneer of "sociodicy," Rousseau rendered disaster as a social construct involving an "interaction between the earthquake and a vulnerable human population (Dynes, 2000; cited by Chester and Duncan, 2010)." According to Neiman (2004), the state and religious groups responded to the Lisbon earthquake in contrasting ways. The prime minister of Portugal, Pombal, adopted a naturalist approach – "Bury the dead and feed the living (p.248)" – in order to prevent plague and famine. It was proved successful. Meanwhile, a Jesuit leader claimed that there would be a much larger catastrophe, and urged people to stop working and keep praying and fasting. He was executed by the authorities for invoking panic. Since then, disaster response in the general public was

separated from religious theodicy as parallel tracks. The former gave priority to human praxis rather than divine salvation. However, even though the public started to lose faith in God's good will, religious belief never disappeared. It continues to exist in the society in a certain way. Neiman comments (p.250):

> Since Lisbon, natural evils no longer have any seemly relation to moral evils; hence they no longer have meaning at all. Natural disaster is the object of attempts at prediction and control, not of interpretation. None of these questions that tormented Europeans reflecting on Lisbon was ever directly answered or even directly rejected. People affirmed the wisdom of God's order in general without demanding to understand too many of its details. Theory proceeded much as Pombal did. It focused on eradicating those evils that could be reached by human hands. Progress, when we achieve it, involves doing just this. Enlightenment thinkers turned to praxis, for the apparent absence of justice in divine institutions was no excuse for tolerating it in human ones.

Contrasting this grand narrative about western modernity, contemporary researches on non-western cultures show that people adopt various types of meaning-making, including religious and moral ideologies, when confronted with suffering, illness, and disaster (Adeney-Risakotta 2009; Chester and Duncan 2010; Honkasalo 2009; Kleiman and Kleiman 1997a; Nuckolls 1992; Shweder 2008; Shweder et al. 1997). For instance, Shweder et al. (1997) and Shweder (2008) study South Asian societies and summarize the three most popular ontological paradigms used for explaining and curing illness: The "biomedical" paradigm treats illness as a natural mechanism constituted of matter, chemicals, and fluids. The "interpersonal" paradigm sees illness as a result of sorcery or poisoning committed by one's enemy. The "moral" paradigm links bodily suffering with one's violation of moral obligations. Shweder rejects the dichotomous differentiation between "traditional" and "modern" medicine. Actually, all three paradigms mentioned above exist in western modern societies as well, though with different contents.

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Many studies delicately map out the variation of theodicy among different places and social actors. Simko (2012) compares the theodicy/commemoration discourses following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon, Shanksville, and Manhattan. She explains the variation of discourse by many factors such as carrier group and audience. Speakers at the Pentagon were from military and national defense sectors; they tended to take a dualistic view, seeing the event as a battle between good and evil. Contrarily, speakers in Manhattan were civic groups with diverse backgrounds; their discourses tended to see the event as a tragedy, and much concerned with the mourner's suffering and grief. Similarly, Adeney-Risakotta (2009) looks at the survivors of the 2006 South Asia tsunami and earthquake. He assumes that "different symbolic languages respond to different questions that arise from different cultural and religious contexts (p.227)" and compares the way different survivors reacted to the disaster. The first one was a young, highly educated male with strong faith in and knowledge about Christianity. He lost most of his family members and struggled with questions like "Who did it?" "Why us?" "Where was God?" His answer was "God did not do this." His faith in God's goodness was maintained, and could still give him strength to move on and take care of his only surviving nephew. The second one was an old, less educated grandmother with Islamic belief. She did not struggle with the theological problem as that young man did. She simply thought God did it and one should let it go. However, since she was responsible for a large household, she was much concerned with how to strengthen her family and ensure its practical survival. The author explains the difference of their discourses by gender, age, education, and other factors. He argues that the survivors (including numerous others) expressed their own existential experience by different moral language.

Their discourses make sense in their own ways, and the researchers do not need to judge them as true or false. However, if one uses theodicy to pursue power or domination over others, e.g., saying that the disaster was a punishment upon somebody, and then attacking them – in this case, it is a "self-deceiving explanation."

Beside scientific/enlightened and religious types of theodicy, I also introduce psychology into this chapter. As discussed in Chapter One, I construe the logic of trauma and recovery, under the conceptualization of psychology, as actually similar to theodicy and sociodicy. All of them involve the task of finding meaning in traumatic or catastrophe events. Yet they also differ with each other in many ways, as we shall see below.

Summary: Theodicy and society

The literatures reviewed above provide an overview of the basic logic and historical changes of theodicy. At the individual level, theodicy is a cultural resource for making accounts of suffering, by which the victims could regain a sense of security and meaningfulness needed to endure the suffering. However, theodicy is not merely an abstract symbolic system hovering in the individual's mind. Rather, it is intertwined with social structure, social control, conflict, and agency. It can be used as an ideological tool to legitimate inequality and power relations. It might also generate social actions aimed to ameliorate or prevent suffering.

Literature reviewed above provides rich information about the historical change and diversity of theodicy. However, the topic has not yet been explored thoroughly. First, the differences among various types of theodicy (religious, social, psychological, etc), in terms of their discursive contents and social characters, still need to be further examined.

Second, the mechanism of social relation, social control, and conflict involved in issues of theodicy is a crucial dimension that students of sociology should pay more attention to. My research attempts to make contributions in these two directions. I conduct a systematic and empirical research, to map out the social division of theodicy among different social spheres. I point out social actors (or carriers) and their specific theodical agendas, to see how theodicy works as a mechanism of social control and conflict.

In the following sections, I will present three threads of theodical meaning-making after the Sichuan earthquake. They are: (i) The issue of the state's responsibility and legitimacy, which occurred in the conflict between the state and civil society. It is close to the idea of "sociodicy" reviewed above. (ii) Religious discourses which attributed the occurrence of the disaster to God's will or the logic of karma. They might generate agendas of moral or spiritual cultivation. (iii) Psychological intervention that helps the individual to recover from trauma.

II. Performance legitimacy: Problems of vulnerability vs. reconstruction in the public/political sphere

1. Performance legitimacy in Chinese history

The concept of legitimacy was introduced into sociology by Weber (1978a), and is still an important topic in contemporary literature (Blau 1963; Connolly 1984; Huntington 1991; Linz 1988; Lipset 1981; Schaar 1981), including those focused on China (Chen 1995; Gries and Rosen 2004; Holbig 2009; Shue 2004; Tong 2011; Zhao 2000; Zhao 2009). According Lipset's often-quoted definition, legitimacy involves "the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are

the most appropriate ones for the society (1981:88)" Legitimacy can be acquired from, or enhanced by many different sources. For instance, Weber (1978a) pointed out three types of legitimacy sources: tradition, charisma, and the legal/administrative system. Later scholars (Lipset 1981; Lowenthal 1976; Zhao 2000) notice the role of socio-economic performance as an additional source. The prolonged effectiveness of the state's performance in economic development could gain people's compliance and support.

Literature on China depicts a very complicated picture of this issue. Shue (2004) reviews the long history of China, and concludes that the legitimacy of a government lies in the preservation of social order, which is further linked to three elements: Truth, Benevolence, and Glory. A good government is expected to hold true knowledge about the natural and moral universe, through studying and self-cultivation. It should undertake benevolent performance to support the people and regulate their livelihood. It also pursues the glory of Sinic culture and civilization, by means of territory expansion and cultural assimilation. These are related to so-called "performance legitimacy" discussed by other scholars. Zhao (2009) and Tong (2011) trace the origin of performance legitimacy in China back to the Zhou Dynasty three thousand years ago. The elite group of the dynasty constructed a narrative in order to justify Zhou's overturn of the previous dynasty. They theorized that the ruler's right to rule comes from the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), which depends on the ruler's moral integrity and performance. According to Tong, a qualified ruler was expected to maintain high moral standards, making himself an example for his subjects. He also bore the duty of performing "benevolent governance" well, which includes: cultivating the people, encouraging agriculture, fairness in the legal system and taxation, and so on. If the ruler fails to fulfill his moral obligation, he would

lose the *tianming* and people's loyalty to him.

Disasters had been challenges to the governance and legitimacy of Chinese rulers. Under the ideology of *tianming*, the rulers were responsible for failures in governance and occurrence of natural disasters, which was regarded as a sign of unfit ruling. Many emperors in history had issued official announcements to blame themselves for such situations (Zhao 2009). On the other hand, traditional agriculture was indeed vulnerable to unpredictable weather, and heavily dependent on the government for survival in hazardous conditions. Thus Chinese rulers developed a system of disaster measures to support victims in need, which were rarely seen in other countries, including grain storage, gratuitous relief money, tax reduction, disaster prevention, and so on (Chen 2012; Tong 2011). These measures are not only the rulers' administrative performances for saving their subjects, but also a necessity for maintaining regime legitimacy. Both poor governance and natural disaster had triggered peasant rebellions at many times in Chinese history.

The term "performance legitimacy" had been originally linked to economic development on the basis of pragmatic concern and rational calculation (Lipset). However, Zhao's and Tong's review of Chinese history show that it is intertwined with ontological and moral ideologies. First, the concept of *tianming* and the causal linkage between the rulers' moral quality and natural events are a quasi-religious theodicy that transcends the empirical, observable natural law which modern people are more likely to adopt. Second, the nature of benevolent governance is not simply "performance" in a pragmatic sense. It is rather the rulers' moral obligation and commitment to taking care of their subjects. Under this ideology, people see governmental officials as "parental

officials" (*fumuguan*) carrying authority over, and responsibility for them. If the government fails to save people from extreme suffering, they might initiate protests or rebellion.

The tradition of moral integrity and benevolent governance still exists in contemporary China. In response to people's rising dissatisfaction and expectation since the 1980's (which culminated in the 1989 Tiananmen protest), the state launched several political and economic policies. For instance, it raised strict regulation and punishment against corruption, in order to recover its moral authority. It also made efforts to guarantee ordinary people's livelihood, including lifting huge populations out of poverty. However, its tolerance of freedom of speech was still limited, and would take repressive measures to deal with opinions or protests that threatened its legitimacy. Tong (2011:152-3) argues that this is another result of the high moral authority the Chinese state bore on its shoulders:

> Having the commanding height on moral issues legitimizes the state power. The Chinese government has been hypersensitive to open criticisms…because the criticism of the government means charging it with immorality. To maintain such legitimacy, the state has the sole moral authority and has therefore tried to reduce the moral authority of other political actors.

After the 2008 earthquake, the official narratives and public opinion showed certain tendencies. First, due to the progress of modernization, as well as the pro-science education designed by the Communist state, the mainstream society basically accepted the scientific worldview to explain the cause of the disaster. However, people with religious belief might still adopt religious theodicy, as presented in the next section. Second, the public basically used the scientific worldview to examine the responsibility of the government. Even religious believers seldom adopted religious theodicy which

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links the government's moral integrity with the occurrence of disaster. Third, the general public's evaluation of the government's performance varied significantly. There were severe critiques of the bad construction quality and wrong decisions in relief work on the part of the local government. However, many people also owed gratitude to the (central) government, regarding the arrival of the Liberation Army and the reconstruction work presented in Chapter Three. The government repressed those negative critiques, and celebrated its achievements, in order to enhance its regime legitimacy.

In the following pages, I will present the public discourses focused on the responsibility of the government for disaster vulnerability and reconstruction. I point out the differentiated concerns of different social groups, and the conflicts between them. The survivors whose family members (especially children) died in the earthquake tended to care about the problem of vulnerable construction, which already existed before the earthquake, and had been a prevailing problem around the whole country. The government tended to repress these demands, and instead invested huge resources in post-disaster reconstruction, and then propagated its achievement in it. These two social actors focused on different kinds of theodical problems. The former looked at questions of "Why?" and "Who did it?", while the latter emphasized "What is the benefit of it?" The former looks *backward* to the cause of high damage and casualty. The latter evades the problem of causality, and shifts the attention *forward*, looking at the present and future. Their differentiated interests created conflicts in the public/political sphere.

2. The responsibility of the government for vulnerable construction

Besides Marxist ideology, the Communist regime worships science as the major worldview used for its administration. During the Cultural Revolution, it banned all

religious beliefs and activities, because it renders religions as feudal superstitions that served the interests of the bourgeoisie. Although the party-state now allows the existence of religions, it still insists the priority of science, and restricts religious freedom of party members. A common slogan of official discourse is "respect science" when doing their works[70]. In 2003, the former Party leader Hu Jintao proposed the idea of "Scientific Outlook for Development" (*kexue fazhan guan*)[71], emphasizing economic development, human rights, sustainability, and coordination[72]. This idea (or slogan) was also adopted in the relief and reconstruction work following the 2008 earthquake.

The general public basically accepted the scientific explanation about the *occurrence* of the earthquake, that is, it was due to natural mechanism rather than the government's moral problem. However, many criticisms questioned the human factors behind the high damage and casualty, including: lacking of pre-disaster warning, the problem of jerry-built projects, and wrong decisions on disaster relief made by governmental officials. I only look at the issue of jerry-built projects, or the problematic construction quality[73]. The social group concerned with it the most is the parents who lost their children in the schools, and outside activists who supported them.

In both Hanwang and Beichuan where I conducted fieldwork, there were schools that collapsed and caused serious casualties during the earthquake. People did have knowledge about the building quality of those collapsed schools. One of my interviewees who lost her child in the school, Zoe (B14 F, 36, high school), said: "Qushan Elementary

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[70] Of course, what kinds of science exactly is in their mind, and whether they respect scientific autonomy, that is, the principle that scientific research should not comply with poli-economic powers, are doubtful. But this issue is much beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[71] *Xianhua*. 10.15.2007. "Hu Jintao Emphasizes: Deeply Realize the Scientific Outlook of Development."

[72] It is unclear how crucial science is, and how exactly science works in this idea.

[73] In Chinese, constructions with poor quality are called "tofu-dreg" (*doufuzha*) constructions.

School had been a dilapidated building. They said they are going to move, but delayed all the time. The second and third floors of the classrooms where my daughter had classes were sealed off. [I] demand the government to offer an explanation." Other witnesses in published texts show more technical details about the problematic quality of the collapsed building, which demonstrates local people's knowledge about construction. For instance, a psychotherapy organization which worked in earthquake zones for several years edited an essay collection of survivors' testimonies (Shi 2009). One essay is about a local survivor living in Beichuan County, called "Grandma Liu." She was a 70-year-old peasant, businesswoman, and knew how to build houses. After the earthquake, her house remained intact while others' collapsed. She survived, and joined the relief work right away. The essay notes her reaction to the debris of Beichuan High School (p.48):

> Looking at the school, two buildings on the sides did not collapse. Only the middle one collapsed. The education building had a so broad width and definitely needed to use two-four walls. Why did they use one-eight walls?[74] The steel bars were not thick enough. Five floors! Thinking of the house designed by herself, although it is an one-floor house, and does not have a nice looking; but it used two-four walls, 24 (unit missing) steel bars, and washed sands. Her own house didn't collapse. If this [school] building used two-four walls, it might have remained intact, and there would be no casualty. These construction and material really put people to death! [It was] sinning (*zaonie*)! Thinking of these, Liu's heart was angry and painful. Looking at the concrete boards hung up one by one, she cried again and again.

A report made at the fifth anniversary of the earthquake (Tang 2013)[75] interviewed many parents and scholars who cared about the construction problem. A mother who lost her child in a kindergarten in Mianzhu said:

> According to the examination team, [the kindergarten] had three levels, but had a foundation

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[74] The number "two-four" and "one-eight" seem to be the specifications of construction materials.

[75] Tang, Qiwei. 05.10. 2013. "The Fifth Anniverssary Memorial of the Sichuan Wenchuan Earthquake." *Radio Free Asia*. It can be retrieved online:
http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shehui/sc-05102013112439.html

of only one meter or so. The ground ring beam[76] couldn't be found. We parents made a joke: "Who might have stolen the ground ring beam?" [The building] definitely had no ring beam. Besides, the building collapsed, and there were no steel bar pillar. They looked like pillars piled up by soil and bricks. The whole weight-sustaining wall had no steel bar…[it] looked like a dilapidated building. No matter what conclusion the government made, such a building failed we parents' requirements.

Many intellectuals, activists, and scholars tried to help the survivors and parents in finding out the truth, and demanding the government investigate and punish those officials involved in corruption. They basically adopted two strategies. First, similar to local survivors mentioned above, they examined the debris of the collapsed buildings, and compared the buildings which collapsed with that did not, and make a hypothesis about the problematic construction quality. Second, in response to the government's reluctance to announce the exact number of student casualties, they themselves gathered data and make a name list of every single student killed in the earthquake. This can be seen as a symbolic practice of mourning the students, as well as a testimony that calls for justice.

Their actions brought repression in return. For instance, a high school teacher, Mr. Liu, posted photos of collapsed school buildings on internet. He was then detained for "inciting subversion," and sentenced to one-year correctional labor (*laogai*)[77]. An activist and magazine editor, Tan Zuoren, proposed the agenda of *5.12 Students Profile* in February 2009, asking the civil society to take action in examining and confirming "the true number of students who died [in the disaster] in every class, every school, every town, every county and city, and every district." Similarly, he was then detained while

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[76] It is a building component that strengthens the building and improves its robustness against earthquake.
[77] *Sinchew Daily*, 07.31.2008. "Publishing Earthquake Tofu-Dreg School Building Photos, Teacher Sentenced One-Year Correctional Labor."

doing that civil investigation in early March, being charged with inciting subversion[78].

The most famous example is Ai Weiwei, a modern artist who was once an art counselor

for designing the stadium used for the 2008 Olympic games in Beijing. Echoing Tan, he

participated in the civil investigation action, and filmed many documentaries about the

collapsed buildings, the list of the lost students, and his conflict with the police[79]. Since

2010, the government repressed him in many ways, including detention, tearing down his

studio, monitoring his house, and restricting his rights of moving and traveling[80].

In contrast to doubts and demands from the civil society, the official discourse

attributed the cause of huge damage to the extent of the disaster itself. In an open press

conference, the journalists asked governmental officials whether they found any problem

about jerry-built projects. The Vice-governor of Sichuan Province, Wei Hong, declared

that the major cause of the excessive damage to the buildings was the overwhelming

magnitude of the earthquake, which was one to two degrees above the quake-resistant

standard set for the schools. The varied effects of the damages to different buildings were

attributed to their varied location. Wei declared[81]:

> Since the geographical locations of the buildings were different, the effect of the earthquake
> upon different places varied. The damages to some schools, hospitals, along with facilities for
> public, cultural, and physical activities, were different. However, the conclusions made by our
> scientific research sectors and authority sectors are the same. The earthquake was the major
> factor of the damages…Hence the Party Committee and the government respect science, and

[78] RFI, 03.04.2009. "Tan Zuoren's '5.12 Student Profile'."
Retrieved online: http://www.rfi.fr/actucn/articles/112/article_12971.asp
[79] The films can be searched on YouTube by his name:
Civil investigation in Beichuan, collaborating with Tan Zuoren:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD9mLJFvHz8&list=PL320C7F03F1F12025
Conflicts with the police: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbHeLYprj1w
[80] One can see the entry of Ai Weiwei on Wikipedia, with further citations:
http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%89%BE%E6%9C%AA%E6%9C%AA
[81] *China Review News*. 03.08.2009. "Vice-Governor of Sichuan: There is no Jerry-Built Project in Sichuan
Earthuquake." Retrieved online:
http://hk.crntt.com/doc/1009/0/8/2/100908256.html?coluid=7&kindid=0&docid=100908256

would handle the requirement of related issues based on [the decision of] the authority sectors. This speech declared the priority of scientific knowledge. But the exact research method and reports were not transparent to the public. And it is unclear whether the government respected scientific autonomy, and whether they publicized the real truth. But anyway, the political consequence of this speech is that it rendered all attempts at investigation on corruption redundant and even unwelcome. So far, no governmental official has been charged with problem of corruption or failed supervision on construction safety. However, in response the parents' demands for truth and responsibility mentioned above, the government allocated them a compensation of sixty thousand RMB for each student killed in the schools. For other people who died in the earthquake, the compensation for their family was only five thousand RMB.

3. Pro-government discourses about disaster relief and reconstruction

The government invested huge resources in the post-disaster resettlement and reconstruction work, as described in Chapter Three. It is an expression of "benevolent performance" and the glorification of the nation/state reviewed above (Tong 2011; Shue 2004). The government itself, the pro-government media and survivors celebrated it as a great achievement under the instruction of the Party and socialism, that they elevated the living condition of the disaster zone even higher than it was before the disaster. In 2011, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao came to Sichuan to examine the progress of post-disaster reconstruction[82]. He said: "The great achievement of the post-disaster recovery and construction after the Wenchuan earthquake sufficiently realized the advantage of socialist institutions, and intensively expressed the good tradition of 'When there is

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[82] CCTV. 05.09.2011. "Wen Jiabao Examined Sichuan Earthquake Zones, Claiming that People's Living Condition Surmounts that before the Disaster."
Retrieved online: http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-05-09/165922432362.shtml

suffering in one place, people from all around come to support.'[83] Again, it showed the coherence and solidarity of the Chinese nation."

Another news report described local survivors' positive responses to the reconstruction work [84]. It demonstrates that regime legitimacy is not solely the state's top-down imposition or fabrication. It also relies on ordinary people's support and compliance from the bottom:

> In June last year (2010), a central government leader went to Sichuan to examine Xiaoba Town in An County, which was reconstructed on an alternative location. A great number of local people voluntarily flowed to the streets and called out: "Communist Party is good!"
>
> The earthquake ruined more than 400 farmhouses in Fangbei village, Huangtu Town, An County. "Without the Party and the government, how could we have such a nice home! Communist Party is good! Socialism is good!" The villagers said.
>
> The heart feeling of "Communist Party is good," "Socialism is good" can be heard everywhere around the disaster zones in An County, Wenchuan, Beichuan, and Qinchuan…
>
> The heart feeling of "Communist Party is good," "Socialism is good" plainly interprets a truth: The post-disaster relief and reconstruction has gained a decisive victory, and the fundamental reason of it is the leadership of the Party. The capacity of the Party's administration endured extremely harsh tests, and also elevated itself through extremely harsh tests. Socialism with Chinese character is the fundamental guarantee. It is the socialism with Chinese character that accomplished a social mobilization with unprecedented scale throughout Chinese history, propelling the post-disaster relief and reconstruction toward victory.

Although this news coverage probably exaggerates the reality, it is not totally wrong. In my own fieldwork, such pro-government sentiment does exit. For instance, Shaun, a retired school teacher living in Hanwang (H8, M, 66, high school) observed that, due to the post-disaster reconstruction, the development of Mianzhu (the larger administrative area which Hanwang belongs to) progressed twenty years ahead of its previous condition.

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[83] 一方有難，八方支援。

[84] *Sichuan Daily*. 05.08.2011. "Wenchuan Earthquake Reconstruction Revelation: The Triumphant Hymn of Self-sufficiency and Support."
Retrieved online: http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2011-05/08/c_121390543.htm

His wife, Tina (H10, F, 60, elementary school, mentioned in Chapter Three), organized a voluntary propaganda team to glorify the Party. She said:

…Later on we built up the houses. Now socialism is so good, we rely on the central Party that supports us. People from the whole country, kind people from the whole country, we owe gratitude [to them]. Thus we organized a propaganda team. We use our songs and dances, and made some mini-dramas (*xiaopin*), to repay the society, repay the homeland. We must have a spirit of gratitude, and promote the goodness of the Communist Party.

She herself made many art pieces. Here I quote a *kuanban*[85] aimed at aged audiences:

Aged people, good days! Cheerfully live long!
Go anywhere hilarious, be sure to take care of your heath.
The Party's policy is good, offering you *dibao*[86] even in rural villages.
No matter how much or few they offer you, [you get] tens of dollars a month.
You have money to go everywhere,
Don't need to ask sons and daughters-in-law for money.
Go into the temple, buy incense to burn, you have three or five dollars [to do it].
First, pray to Guanyin[87] for peace. Second, pray to Buddha for long life.
Third, pray to Confucius for making children study well.
Educate children to study well, and repay the homeland (*zuguo*) as they grow up.
Communist Party is good! Every people should remember it. Re-mem-ber!

This piece describes the benevolence many people received from the party-state. The old people could rely on the Party for a living, and could go anywhere they like. It also expresses religious belief in Buddhism, which is popular among the aged in rural Sichuan. Again, the believers now have money to buy incense to burn, a required ritual when praying to the deities. Tina attributed this economic sufficiency to the Party's policy, and it is people's obligation to educate their offspring to make contributions in return in the future. This piece demonstrates the mutual commitment between the state and people

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[85] *Kuaiban* is a speech art that organizes words into certain fixed rhythm and rhyme. Unfortunately, my translation inevitably misses that subtlety.
[86] As mentioned in Chapter Three, *dibao* is a kind of social subsidy for people with poor financial condition.
[87] Guanyin is a Buddhist deity. Its Sanskrit name is Avalokitesvara.

(Tong 2011, Zhao 2009), in which the former conducts benevolent performance, while the latter dedicate their loyalty and submission in return.

Another strategy of promoting the party-state's merit is through comparison. For instance, some writers use cross-national comparison to justify the advantage of socialism and centralized authorities. For instance, Gao and Wang (2010) compare the post-disaster relief and reconstruction in China and Haiti, and explain the difference by their political and economic conditions. In their narrative, Haiti has been ruled by a weak democratic government and suffered from military violence. Its economy is among the poorest countries in the world. After the Haiti earthquake, the government could not respond effectively, and could only call for international aid. Contrastingly, China follows socialism and has undergone a huge economic development. Its centralized authorities quickly summoned resources from the whole country and allocated them to the disaster zone. Its spirit of "serve the people" is also proved better than Haiti's false democracy.

Another commentary[88] compares China with European countries, which are models of advanced western civilization, in terms of their scale. It says:

> The democratic small countries in Europe, with millions or ten millions people, are so beautiful like delicate castles under nice care. However, China has to take the big size and crowdedness as starting points for planning its livelihood.
> There are ten millions people living in the massive area affected by the earthquake…It equals a middle-level country in Europe. Think about it. If we ruin most living facilities in Sweden or Greece and restart everything, what would that mean? In China, one rich province supports one damaged county, investing one percent of its annual revenue in the reconstruction, thus reshaped the earthquake zones quickly[89]. Only big countries could do it, only a big country with a strong central regime could realize this possibility.

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[88] *Huanqiu Times*. 05.12.2011. "Wenhuan, a True of the Thousand-faced China."
Retrieved online: http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2011-05/12/c_121407591.htm
[89] It is the "counterpart-aiding" policy described in Chapter One.

These discourses argue that *only* the present socialist and centralized polity in China could accomplish the grand reconstruction work we see today, while other countries with different institutions cannot. The validity of such an argument is not without doubt. As reviewed in Chapter One, Lin (2012) criticized the post-disaster reconstruction in Sichuan as an authoritarian imposition that hindered the mobilization of civil society. The often-glorified "counterpart aiding" policy also made the problem of corruption more difficult to detect.

4. Summary

The issue of the state's responsibility in disaster vulnerability and its performance legitimacy in the relief and reconstruction work involved theodical meaning-making in the public and political sphere. Different social groups launched different agendas, which focused on different theodical problems. The civil society asked questions like "Why?" and "Who did it?" They looked *backward* at the problem of construction quality and political corruption, and asked for somebody to take the responsibility. Contrastingly, the state avoided and even repressed these voices. They shifted the focus *forward* on the question of "What is the benefit?" By means of benevolent performance, including relief work, reconstruction, and social subsidy for the survivors, it gained loyalty and compliance from its subjects, though not all of them.

The knowledge and discourses used in this thread of meaning-making basically follows a scientific worldview. They adopted, or claimed to adopt the logic of natural science to find out the truth. Yet different social actors made different attributions. The civil society, mainly the parents of students killed in schools, and the activists and intellectuals who supported them, examined the debris of the collapsed buildings and

questioned the construction quality. They looked at the building itself, which was determined by *human* and *social* factors, for reasons for collapse. In this sense, their theodicy is a kind of "sociodicy." On the contrary, the government concluded that the reason for collapse was simply the location of the buildings. The natural forces of the earthquake were simply too huge and surpassed what humans could do. In this way, they shift the burden of responsibilities to *nature*. Theoretically speaking, both sides might have been influenced or driven by a certain bias, and they chose the answers that fit their interest or desire. Unfortunately, so far there is no third-party institution that could investigate the truth in an impartial, detached, and trust-worthy manner (given that such resources were either controlled or regulated by the state). Hence so far there is no commonly agreed conclusion about the truth.

Unlike its persistent attitude toward the problem of construction quality, the state made use of benevolent performance to showcase its administrative capacity and its care for people. The pro-government discourses, produced either by the government itself or the civil society, glorified the achievement of the relief and reconstruction work, and thus justified the absolute authority of the Communist regime, seeing it as the best option among different political systems in the world. Such discourse reinforced the mutual commitment between the state and the society, in which the former takes responsibility for taking care of the latter. The latter owe gratitude and compliance to the former. Nevertheless, not all people whole-heartedly bought this ideology and supported the government. As shown in Chapter Three, people in disaster zones complained of the state about many things, such as the forceful recruitment of lands and properties, the rising price of commodities and food, the unceasing suspicion of corruption, the unfair

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allocation of resources, prohibition of mourning in the relic parks, and so on.

In the next part, I will turn to another institutional resource of theodicy, religion. Although modern society underwent the trend of enlightenment and disenchantment, it could not wipe out the persistent influence of religion, though the latter does not have the great power it once did.

III. Religious theodicy: Moral judgment vs. revelation

As reviewed in the earlier part of this chapter, along with the progress of enlightenment, science and religion became two parallel worldviews which function in different layers of social life. The former dominates the practical dimensions of public affairs; while the latter retreats into the moral and private sphere. Now I will look at the way religious communities interpreted the cause and meaning of the disaster.

I assume that the religious canons (Bible, Quran, and Buddhist sutras) provide a pool of possible interpretations about disaster, yet there is no way to judge which one is the correct answer for any single event. Inside this universe of possibility and uncertainty, the religious groups or individual believers select specific interpretations that could help them cope with suffering. For instance, in biblical texts, sufferings can be results of human sin (*Genesis* 3), spiritual battle and test (*Job*), signs of the doomsday (*Matthew* 24:7-8), God's judgment or punishment, and so on. Christians might choose between different explanations when facing hazardous events. Different kinds of explanation imply different understandings of God and humankind, and they form dialectics with each other. Also, theodicy is not only abstract thoughts floating in one's head. It correlates how people view and evaluate others in real life.

In my fieldwork, I interviewed people with different religious beliefs, including Buddhism, Protestantism, and Islam. In order to reduce the complexity, I only present Protestant and Islamic discourses. They are both Abrahamic religions and share some sort of cosmology and theology. The interviewees include local survivors with religious believes, as well as pastors and missionaries from within and outside the earthquake zone (I will discuss them further in Chapter Five). I asked them how they thought about the reason for the Sichuan earthquake, and why it happened in Sichuan. Since they are religious believers, I invited them to share their understanding about the disaster based on their religious belief.

Theodicy in the tradition of Christianity explains the *occurrence* of disaster by God's will, rather than merely natural mechanism. However, the reason God created or allowed the disaster to happen varies. The interview data shows three major categories, all of which had their origins in the Scripture. The first category is punitive theodicy, which renders the disaster as a punishment for human sin. It involves a moral judgment that claims some or all people as sinners. The second category is non-punitive theodicy, which avoids using the concepts of sin and punishment to interpret the disaster. It either sees the disaster as a lesson, a blessing, or a sign. The last one is agnosticism and pragmatism, which do not conjecture God's will, and would rather think about what one can do for the survivors.

Based on the data I gathered in fieldwork, no independent variable has been found that could explain the interviewees' choice of theodicy (among the three categories introduced above). I examine the demographical variables, e.g., gender, age, education, and occupation; as well as religion-related variables, e.g., the membership or position in

the religious community, ones seniority as a believer, and one's familiarity with religious canons (shown in the delicacy and abundance of their narratives). None of them determines or correlates with the choice of theodicy. However, people who held punitive theodicy tended to make certain judgments on other people they saw or knew in real life. It is not necessarily so vice versa. In the following pages, I will present these different versions of theodicy, especially looking at (i) the contrast and dialectic between different theodicies; (ii) the connection between the interviewee's narratives and their daily life.

(1) Punitive theodicy

Punitive theodicy assumes that all or some people are sinners, and the disaster was a punishment. It involves moral judgment, and sometimes boundary-making, that symbolically differentiates the speakers from others they saw or knew in real life.

For instance, Yvon (H06, F, 33, elementary school) lived in a rural village near Hanwang, with her husband, daughter, father, and father-in-law. She learned Christian belief from her grandmother and mother. She once worked in a weaving factory; her husband worked in a winery. The earthquake destroyed their house and left them the heavy economic burden of rebuilding. After the earthquake, she quit her job and stayed at home to take care of her daughter (who attended elementary school), her father, and father-in-law. Considering the occurrence of the earthquake, she said:

> Because the Bible said that we have sinned and we deserved it. God once destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah since there was no [righteous man]. This time we had the earthquake, in the future there might be more disaster, all because of our sin. If these people don't repent and behave well, definitely everybody is going to confront a big disaster.

This message comes from *Genesis* 19. It is a general idea about sin and punishment. Although further evidence is needed, this abstract idea might have some connection with the way she looked at and got along with others in real life. Elsewhere in her interview,

she mentioned that people living around that area were selfish, and she did not socialize with them. She commented her neighbors' behavior after the earthquake: "Those who sinned still sin. Some are even worse than before. Especially on that day, anyway I don't want to listen to what they said…gossiping this and that, and dirty words…I generally stay at home." After the earthquake, she stayed home to take care of her family. However, she did not really isolate herself from the society. Rather, she established a good relationship with a friend in the same village, also a Christian, and further gained connection to a Christian-based NGO working in Mianzhu. When I revisited her in early 2013, she was doing a part-time job, working in her relative's "farm-stay,"[90] serving many guests every day.

The next example indicates a clearer linkage between theodicy and real life. Martha (B09, F, 58, elementary school) is a Muslim living in Beichuan I introduced in Chapter Three. Her husband was a cadre in charge of examining governmental staffers' integrity, and hence demands high moral standards in his family. They seldom socialized with other people, in order to maintain the impartiality required by his duty. However, Martha seemed to have sharp observation of others, especially those in the Muslim community. She interpreted the disaster as a punishment to people who did not behave well:

> Based on the [Islamic] doctrine, [some Muslims] did not have good faith. They didn't go to the meeting. They visited prostitutes at day and gambled at night. Many people did that. Leo and his mother[91]. He lost his son who earned much money. They are Muslims. This family is the worst, and yet [he] has been a governmental official. He didn't join the meeting, and spoke nonsense. A Muslim should follow the Quran. At least one should behave well and obey the doctrines. The state's law is the state's law. The doctrine is the doctrine. Don't visit prostitutes

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[90] "Farm-stay" (*nonjiale*, which literally means "happiness in rural households") is a kind of accommodation often located in rural or semi-rural areas. It provides foods and drinks, leisure facilities, and guestrooms for customers or visitors.

[91] Leo (pseudo name) is somebody, also a Muslim, she knew.

and gamble. The state's law also prohibits them. Smoking and drinking are all forbidden. But these people broke the doctrines. I thought it (the earthquake) was Allah's punishment.

The one who provided the richest narrative of punitive theodicy is a missionary, Peter (M, 37, High school). He came from Shandong Province and was once a factory worker. He received complete training in Christian theology and was ordained as a missionary. Since 2010, he came to the earthquake zone for evangelism. I interviewed him in Beichuan in 2012. He said:

> The occurrence of the earthquake is due to God's sovereignty. God did it to manifest His justice and love…Why did God make the disaster occur in Sichuan? Because there are so many people in Sichuan who worship idols. It was God's attack, and at the same time made the survivors repent and turn to Him…The Bible says, "I (God) will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. (*Rom* 9:15)" Everything is under God's Sovereignty. Second, human's life is also in God's hand…The so-called good and nice cannot be judged by human's standard. Under God's standard, everybody is a sinner. Hence it does not matter who should die, and should not die, Because God sees everybody as a sinner. The Bible says, humans have sinned, and the consequence of sin is death…

This passage is a general assumption about God's Sovereignty and the sinfulness of all human beings, with a special note about idol worship, which is particularly popular in Sichuan (as shown in Chapter Five, many missionaries I interviewed mentioned the difficulty of preaching the Gospel in Sichuan, because of its deep tradition of Buddhism and idol/ancestor worship). He moved on and shared more observations about the Sichuanese:

> You can look at what kind of life the Sichuanese are leading. They know how to enjoy [life] more than others do. They have fun (*chihewanle*)[92], play Mahjong, and drink tea[93]. You come

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[92] The Chinese idiom *Chihewanle* (吃喝玩樂) literally means: eat, drink, play, and have fun. It is a negative term describing a lifestyle that only seeks for fun and no work.

[93] "Drink tea" here means a way people spend leisure time. A small group of people gather together in a teahouse, drink tea, talk, play Mahjong or card games, and have fun.

to Shandong. [People in Shandong] work hard for children for their entire life. The children go to school, [the parents] earn money. Build the house, get married, take care of children. They get tired and enjoy little. They are different from Sichuanese who have fun when they have children, and still have fun when they have no child. When you go to the street, many people are gambling. Old and young people all gamble. Old people pass to children, generation by generation…

This observation criticizes the lifestyle of Sichuanese as only seeking fun and not working hard. Peter compared it with the lifestyle of people in Shandong, to show the former's relative idleness. This criticism is a moral judgment about the life style of people affected by the disaster. It is also a boundary-making that claims a difference between the speaker (a Shandongnese) and the others (Sichuanese).

However, it does not mean that he dislikes all Sichuanese and does not make friends with them. Above all, he is a missionary and needs to establish rapport with local people. In Beichuan, I once walked with him to the market and saw him buying lunch. He talked with a merchant in friendly way and shared knowledge about Shandong with her. Not to mention the local people who converted as Christians. He treated them like friends or family.

The tension between justice and love is a theological dilemma inherent in Christianity. It is not only a conceptual problem hovering in the air, but also influences the believers' and the churches' attitude toward others. For instance, the recent debates about gay rights in Europe and the U.S. posed a question in the Christian community, whether they should adopt inclusion and tolerance with love, or exclusion and opposition in favor of Law and justice.

Similarly, the side effect of punitive theodicy is that it might unnecessarily stigmatize the victims, imposing on them a label of being worse than others. It might hurt the their

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feelings and even double their pain, especially if they could not understand what exactly he/she has done wrong, or whether he/she is worse than those who suffered less. Nevertheless, there is an alternative version of theodicy, which brings more consolation to the victims.

(2) Non-punitive theodicy: Revelation and benevolence

This type of theodicy avoids making judgments about sin or the moral deficit of the victims. Rather, it sees disaster as a lesson, a blessing, or a sign. This interpretation reduces the likelihood of causing secondary harm to the victims, and could offer more comfort and consolation the victims need to endure the suffering.

Cheryl (H01, F, 25, vocational high school) originially lived in Wudu, a small town near Hanwang. She worked as a salesperson in a mobile communication store. After the earthquake, she encountered some NGO workers with Christian backgrounds. The latter preached the Gospel to her and convinced her to convert as a Christian. She even joined the NGO as a volunteer for a while. Later on, through that Christian network, she went to Shenzhen, an industrial city in south China, to learn to cut hair. After coming back, she opened a little barbershop in New Hanwang, and wished to make it a spot to preach the Gospel to local people. About the occurrence of the earthquake, she said:

> As time goes by, there would be many disasters in the Last Days…Looking at the trend of earthquake, there are many disasters all around the world. Probably God used disaster to tell [us] that the end is coming soon. I believe that, in order to spread the Gospel back to Jerusalem, probably [it] needs to pass through Sichuan[94]. Hence the earthquake was good for this place. You see that the Gospel has been spread quickly after the earthquake.
> (I asked: People might think that they didn't do anything bad.)
> Life is in God's hand. Many things are unpredictable. No matter how many good things one

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[94] The message that the Gospel shall be spread back to Jerusalem through China is often heard in the Christian community in China in recent years. There are many ambitious churches and missionaries eager to preach the Gospel in Middle East, though it is dangerous to do so due to the Islam tradition there.

did before dying, it is not necessary that he survive the disaster. Hence the time of life is in God's hand. Nobody can calculate how long he can live…It has nothing to do with [whether one is good or bad]. Even the worst guy also has a good side. It's impossible that somebody is totally bad.

This dialogue covers many different issues. Disaster as a sign of the Last Days is an often heard idea throughout history. It reminds the believers to keep good faith and follow the Gospel well, so to be prepared for the Judge. It can be seen as a social control inside the religious group. "Life is in God's hand" and "No matter one is good or bad" are both typical Christian thoughts that teach the believers to accept whatever happens to them, and abandon the false expectation that good people get good fate. Lastly, this passage also mentions the tide of evangelism and conversion following the disaster. I will discuss it in Chapter Five.

Another example, Joan (H03 F, 43, high school), lived in Xinglong village, a rural area near Hanwang. Her house collapsed in the earthquake. And she was trapped under a floor slab for a long time, which caused a serious visceral wound in her body. Afterwards, she suffered from bodily pain and breath problems, and could not do any wage labor again. She received surgery and treatment several times, with support from the government and outside NGOs. When I interviewed her, she said that her life had been full of suffering since getting married, e.g., bad relationship with husband, loss and illness of family members, the bodily and emotional pain caused by the earthquake, the neighbors' prejudice against her (for her physical problem), and the heavy loan debt for rebuilding her house. She learned the Gospel from a Christian-based NGO, and gained strength to face it all. When she was alone at home (being unable to work), she read the Bible and listened to religious songs. She joined church meetings every week. Her new hope was to share her experiences widely, as a witness of God's power. About the meaning of the

disaster, she said:

> I didn't think about these before. Now I read these books (the Bible) and think that everything is God's arrangement. God rang a warning bell through these disasters: You should believe in me (God)…I don't think it was a natural phenomenon. Because the universe was created by God, every change is governed by God. Everything is in God's hand…If I did not believe in Jesus, facing these disasters, I would definitely feel afraid. But now I believe in Jesus. As long as I believe in Jesus, God would take care of me. The universe was created by Him. He also created us. We who believe in Jesus, He would take care of us.

The first half of this speech is about the purpose of the disaster, that God showed His almighty power and sent a warning. The second half turns in another direction, saying that God takes care of her. This faith gave her consolation and strength to keep living and face all her suffering. This sentiment left the problem of causality behind, and entered into a new direction, that she could move towards a meaningful future with hope.

People who hold non-punitive theodicy might have some opinions about punitive theodicy. I asked Christian respondents about how they thought of punitive theodicy (the earthquake is God's punishment on sinners), and they provided some comments. For instance, Phoebe, a fellow worker in a Christian-based NGO in Mianyang, disagreed with punitive theodicy, saying:

> Some people went too far, [their opinions seem like] trial or discipline. It was hurtful to the victims…Nature is in God's control. God wants to let His children learn. Jesus himself made prophecy, [there will be] disease, epidemic, and what to learn. Suffering itself has positive side and educational character. I would not talk about sin and punishment. It depends. In Southern China, many people worship [idols] in temples. Everywhere there are [people who worship idols]. Jesus, [there was a] blind man. Whose sin was it? It was self-righteousness[95].

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[95] It comes from *John* 9:1-4. Jesus and his disciples met a man born blind. The disciples asked Jesus whose sin caused his blindness. Jesus said that it was not anybody's sin, but "he was born blind so that the acts of God may be revealed through what happens to him." Phoebe quoted this story, saying that to attribute suffering to somebody's sin is self-righteousness.

The Siloam tower, were people who survived more righteous than those who died? No[96]. As for the trial, we all have invisible idols. God is mercy, love, and educates us in certain way. Suffering and death has its time.

Similarly, the pastor of the Three-Self Church[97] of Beichuan County said:

Some people said that Sichuanese don't believe in God, so the disaster came. This is not supposed to be our belief…We know that God is love. Surely mankind has negative sides. But one could not attribute [the disaster] to man's sin. The Bible tells us, Humans sinned, and got punishment. God's discipline. But God wouldn't use such a cruel thing to enlighten humans. However, through disaster, we could see God's good will. God brought larger blessing to Beichuan…

Today what the survivors see and experience could be something we see several decades later. For instance, around Beichuan, although an old town was ruined, a new town was built up. The New county capital investment of ten trillion RMB…These facilities and constructions, and the whole design and construction of the whole Beichuan, were accomplished by top scholars in China. Through a little county capital, we can see the Party and the government's care about us. And the concerns of love-hearted people all around the world with Beichuan.., don't we appreciate that we live for more decades [than the dead did][98]?

These two respondents admitted that humans are all sinners, but they did not attribute the disaster to it. Rather, they emphasized the idea "God is love" and tended to interpret the disaster as a sign, an education, or blessing, which has a positive meaning that humans could learn from. They avoided stigmatization and boundary-making, and thus the emotional tension that might follow. However, they also left new questions unanswered. Phoebe criticized the punitive theodicy as self-righteousness that could hurt the victims. But she did not specify what kind of education the disaster was, and what exactly God wanted humans to learn. On the other hand, the pastor in Beichuan pointed out the great

[96] This is from Jesus' teaching: "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them, do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who live in Jerusalem? No, I tell you! But unless you repent you will all perish as well! (*Luke* 13:4-5)"

[97] Three-Self Church is a system of Protestant churches that is recognized and administrated by the state.

[98] The pastor mentioned the achievement made by the Party and the government, probably because that the Three-Self Church is administrated by the state.

achievement of reconstruction, which accelerated the development of the disaster zones. However, as he himself implied, the disaster was still a cruel thing. Whether the balance of the cruelty and the blessing is even or fair is still a question.

(3) Agnosticism/pragmatism

The last type of response abandons any attempt at attribution, be it punishment or education. The Scripture related to it is the Book of Job. A faithful man, Job, lost all his property and family, and suffered from illness. The readers know that it was due to a gamble between God and Satan. However, until the end of the story, Job still did not know this. It implies that humans could never know what the real cause of their fate is. Yet Job still kept firm faith, and God returned him more than he lost. This story teaches the believers to keep faith even when one is in suffering and does not know the cause.

In the Christian circle, not all people sought for a clear answer for the disaster. Rather, they focused on what the church could do for the victims. Paul (M, 35, junior high school), a missionary who came to Beichuan for relief work and evangelism, shared his concern about the disaster, and his comments on punitive theodicy (disaster was a punishment) and non-punitive theodicy (disaster was a message):

> We focus on what the church could do. This is the point. What role should the church take in the disaster zones? Before 2008, House Churches were underground[99]. In the society, they did not participate in social work as a group. It has been a long time. The year 2008 changed this. Christians came out, due to love and sense of social responsibility. Unconditional. Regardless of faith and status [of the victims], give [them] care, comfort, and companionship. Why did God allow the earthquake to occur here? [We] could hardly get a commonly agreed conclusion through theological study. [We] oppose idol worship and see it as sin. [Yet] the church is not the judge, but rather the redeemer, the pupils of Christ. [We] define ourselves as comforters and helpers, not a judge. The weakness of human being is obvious. If God was to

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[99] Different from the Three-Self Church, "House Church" refers to underground churches not recognized by the state, but not including the heretic sects. I will introduce them in Chapter Five.

deliver this message [via the earthquake], the price was too high. This question is hard to answer.

The conscience of Christians was awakened. The dedication of Love, it needs not to be Sichuan. Everywhere could bring this effect…God let us come in before the earthquake, but the church did not wake up. Due to the painful price (the disaster), Christians' conscience woke up a little bit. Many Christians want to explain God in certain ways. It is problematic. God did not provide an explanation. We want to make explanations for our actions, it's not God's action. Our explanations often appear shallow, blunt, and farfetched as time goes by.

This speech puts the problem of God's will into brackets. He was more concerned with the responsibility, the social role and action of the Christian community. As shown in Chapter Five, the disaster brought a tide of Christian volunteers and NGOs (along with non-religious NGOs) to Sichuan to offer support. It was considered as a huge mobilization of the Christian community rarely seen before. The churches, NGOs, and individual Christians might hold different theodical interpretations about the disaster. But according to Paul's philosophy, these interpretations do not matter. It is the social participation that really matters.

This idea left out the problem of causality, which seems to be an unsolvable conundrum, and turned to the realm of public participation. The latter was in line with the mobilization of the civil society around the whole country following the disaster.

Summary

This part introduces religious discourse about disaster. The punitive theodicy is a *causal* explanation that interprets the disaster as God's punishment to sinners. Some believers attributed the occurrence of the Sichuan earthquake to specific people's sin, e.g., Sichuanese in general, or somebody they saw or knew. This interpretation is linked to moral judgment, boundary-making and symbolic exclusion. It might also be hurtful to the victims (although the speaker might be a victim him/herself). The non-punitive theodicy

is a *teleological* explanation that sees the disaster as a lesson, a blessing, or a sign. It sees all humans as sinners, and thus avoids the emotional tension evoked by punitive theodicy. Rather, it emphasizes God's love and the meaningfulness of suffering. However, one might still ask: What kind of lesson is it? Is the price fair?

Two kinds of responses leave the problem of causality behind. The first is the belief that God loves and takes care of people in faith. It provides consolation and strength for the survivors to face suffering. The second is the agnostic and pragmatic philosophy that looks at Christians' responsibility and public participation.

IV. Trauma and recovery mediated by psychological knowledge

As reviewed in Chapter One, the enterprise of psychology already developed a system of academic knowledge and clinical practice dealing with trauma and recovery. Some scholars analyze trauma by the logic of meaning-making (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson 1998; Janoff-Bulman 1992; Janoff-Bulman and Frantz 1997). They see trauma as a disruption of daily assumptions about the life world, and the victim struggles to regain meaning out of it. The cognitive strategies include: adopting a new worldview and expectations (bad things happen all the time), or seeking for reasons, purposes, and benefit from it (suffering has meaning). Other scholars adopt the term "post-traumatic growth" (PTG) to study the positive transformation after trauma, such as increased appreciation of life, increased sense of personal strength, and a richer existential and spiritual life (Joseph and Linley 2006; Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995, 2004).

After the earthquake, countless professional and amateur workers came to the earthquake sites to offer help. Many of them publicized their experiences of dealing with

survivors in need (Jia, Huang and Liang 2012; Shen 2009; Shi 2009; Wang 2011; Zhang and Zhang 2009). In this part, I introduce two cases of psychological intervention aimed at earthquake survivors. The first is a writing partner program organized by Professor Xiao in Sichuan University. The Team adopted the paradigm of narrative psychology and the theory of PTG, to conduct psychological intervention for a large group of school children. This case demonstrates how Western psychology was used in Chinese society with innovative adjustment. The second case is a psycho-therapist, Carl (alias), who worked in Beichuan for four years. I interviewed him, talking about the methodology of psychological intervention he and his team used in Beichuan.

(1) Post-traumatic growth practiced in teamwork

After the earthquake, huge amounts of people needed emotional support and consolation. In response to this situation, workers in psychological intervention sought for efficient ways to offer service with limited human resources. A professor of psychology in Sichuan University, Xiao, created the *Wucaishi* (colorful stone) writing partner program. Xiao adopted the concept of PTG developed by Tedoschi and Calhoun (1995, 2004), which suggests people "deeply and continuously write down their most painful events in theirs lives, and finally improve their bodily and mental health. Some concrete narrative method, like personal autobiography, description of the lost, metaphorical stories, practices of daily writing, has been designed to facilitate the post-traumatic meaning reconstruction (Xiao and Chen 2010: 24)." Xiao applied the paradigm with a conceptual and organizational innovation – to conduct psychological interventions with amateur resources in a large open population, rather than formal counseling taken in a closed room. Her team selected 610 school children from nine elementary and high

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schools in the disaster zones, as subjects of the program. On the other hand, they recruited 468 college students in Sichuan University as volunteer mentors. They paired the school children with college volunteers and made one-to-one partnerships, communicating via mail. The children wrote essays on certain topics, sharing experiences and thoughts; the volunteers read the essays and gave corrections and advice, guiding the children toward a positive direction.

The program was supervised by a team of psychologists and school teachers. The essay topics were set to follow a series of stages: (1) release the emotions; (2) discover positive events; (3) externalize the troubles; (4) reconstruct the stories; (5) stabilization. Through the two-year writing practices, the school children gradually recovered from sorrow and trauma, gaining new hopes, aspirations and friendships with college partners who also learned a lot from the children. Xiao arranged two annual meetings, inviting them to visit Sichuan University and see their partners in person, thus creating a strong collective bond.

Xiao's team collected students' essays and analyzed them in an academic fashion. They sorted out some major patterns and themes[100]. In the first stage, the children shared their thoughts about the disaster and death: "Humans are so insignificantly small in the face of Nature." "Why couldn't good people live long?" "When my relatives passed away one by one, I wished to die." As the program moved on, the children' writings show troubles, confusions and uncertainty in their minds. But they also gained new meanings, bravery, and visions about life and future. They wrote: "Life is really fragile…then let us show our most beautiful gestures before it breaks…" "In my eyes, people with no ambitions, guts and ideals are all worthless wretches…I should not only do well for

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[100] However, beyond the published quotations, the original texts are kept confidential, blocking the chance for outside scholars to study them from different angles. And there is no way to tell whether the editors screened out certain aspects of the texts.

myself, but also make people around me happy, not to disappoint and hurt them…" "Life has too many challenges, failures and endeavors. The meaning of life lies in self-completion."[101]

Xiao's team noticed that the children were eager to gain recognition or affirmation from their mentors. They sometimes tried to please their partners, writing something they thought their partners might like to see (p.17). It is unclear whether and how the team solved this problem. But it shows that the effect of the program is not only trauma-healing or post-traumatic growth, but also certain kind of *socialization*, that the program guides the children toward a specific direction it wants them to follow.

(2) Individualistic and non-causal methodology

Carl is a graduate student of psychology in a top academic institute in China[102]. The institute organized a team of counselors and therapists to help people in need in Beichuan since 2008. They dealt with many different social groups, such as lonely aged people, orphans, and parents who lost children. Carl has been the team's chief for four years. I interviewed him to understand the way they conducted counseling or therapy, and their observation of their clients. He revealed his interpretation of the survivors' aggressive behavior, i.e., blaming somebody as responsible for children's death:

> Earthquake is a natural disaster, but he thought the government should be responsible for it. It was a rationalization for him. For instance, students in Beichuan High School were gone. Many parents thought that the main cause was the bad construction, and that the government did not supervise it well. It was a rationalization. He shifted something in his mind to the others, and thus felt better. From a professional angle, it is a self-defense mechanism…[The problem of construction quality] was not the point. The point is that he had painful experiences about his child's death. He attributed it to others, rather than the relationship

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[101] The reflection on the meaning of life will be examined in Chapter Six in this dissertation.
[102] He did not wish to publicized the name of his institution.

between him and his child. Simply speaking, the parents would recall: "Today the kid didn't want to go to school. I forced him to go to school. He was about to be late, I pushed him to go." This tiny thing would impact the parents very much. After the kid left (died), he would consider it as something not compensable, and consistently enlarge it. At this moment, if he could find somebody to blame, this rationalization would be very easily accepted. Just like [many people said that] central state officials were good, but the local state didn't execute it. Sometimes when something cannot be explained, when one is more willing to accept a seemingly reasonable explanation, one would accept it…But in fact, earthquake is a natural disaster and has nothing to do with anybody.

This passage shows Carl and his team's individualistic methodology. They treated the parents' attempts at seeking truth and justice (by launching protest and appeal) as a self-defense mechanism, by which they could transfer their sense of guilt to an outsider, that is, the government in this context. And the counselors were not supposed to follow, or even respond to this logic.

Carl's narrative pointed out an important aspect of traumatic experience: the attribution of loss. When the parents lose their children, they want to seek for a reason, in order to regain meaning and control, and make the loss bearable. This act of attribution can be inward or outward. The parents might render themselves as the cause of the loss, and then sink into guilt and self-blame. But they might also blame outside agents involved in the traumatic events. Carl suggested that blaming outside agents is a self-defense mechanism used to reduce the sense of guilt, a side effect of inward attribution. In order to further explore this seemingly one-sided logic, I responded to Carl saying that the problem of construction quality was an issue that drew attention from the general public, not only the students' parents. Then Carl explained that the position of psychologists/counselors does not allow them to evaluate that kind of issue. They have no right to discuss the issue (who should be responsible for the tragedy) with the clients. They only focus on the clients'

emotional problem, and help them solve it. When a client talked about those issues, the counselors would ask him: "How could we make you feel better?" or "Will you really forget your child if you do this (complaining or launching protest)?"

Carl's team adopted many methods to help the clients release their emotion. One of them was that the counselors share their own experiences with the clients, so the latter could make a connection. The other one is "farewell ritual." The clients (anyone who lost family member) write down messages they want to tell the dead, and then burn them. It can help the clients to compensate their regret. This approach drew the clients' attention back to their own thoughts and moods, and their relationship with the dead, which were solely private issues. Then the clients could operate certain ritualistic behaviors to make themselves feel better. Obviously, this method of loss-coping is much more feasible and peaceful than fighting with somebody about the problem of responsibility[103].

Due to limited data sources, the readers may not assume that the case of Carl's team represents the position of psychology in the whole country. As reviewed in Chapter One, trauma can be used in political actions as a testimony of injustice (Das 2003; Das 2007; Fassin and Rechtman 2009). However, the counseling performed by Carl's team is an ideal type of individualistic methodology. They reduced the quest for truth and justice to the clients' self-defense mechanism. Under this logic, all debates about public/political affairs can be rendered as null or unnecessary. It might further block the chance of social reform, and leave the *status quo* unchallenged. Second, their method of releasing emotion does not involve causal thinking or moral discipline, which exist in other kinds of theodical meaning-making discussed above. It helps the clients to "let go" and move on toward a new life.

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[103] Unfortunately, I did not get the data about how the clients responded to Carl's treatment.

Summary

This application of psychology aims to reduce the emotional pain of trauma victims. Echoing the "therapeutic discourse" mentioned in Chapter Two, it does not provide a fixed meaning about suffering or loss; instead, it guides the clients' thoughts into certain directions, and lets them construct their own narratives.

Different paradigms of psychotherapy might use different ways to help the clients. The two cases presented in this study share some commonplaces. The therapists or counselors do not let the clients dwell on the causal problem of the suffering (questions like: "Why is there earthquake?" "Who is responsible for the loss?"), which might induce complaints and anger. The writing problem organized for school children guided them to think about positive sides of life, and reestablish a new meaning of life, which looks forward to the future rather than backward to the past. The therapist team led by Carl used specific techniques, like sharing experiences and farewell rituals, to help the clients "let go."

From a sociological viewpoint, these therapeutic approaches might have unintended social functions besides trauma healing and emotion release. The writing program can be seen as a process of socialization that attempted to bring the children (back) to a "normal" way of life, guided by positive attitude, meaning, and goal. The rapport between the surviving children and the college volunteers even made the latter a role model for the former. On the other hand, Carl's therapist team's individualistic methodology avoided the politically sensitive controversy about justice and responsibility. It turned to the clients' private life world, and guided them to release their psychological pain through easy and peaceful techniques, rather than fighting against somebody else. Its social consequence is a seeming harmony with less conflict.

V. Conclusion

This chapter depicts a social map of theodicy. I single out three threads of meaning-making. Each of them exists in a different sphere, and is involved with different social carriers. In this final section, I further classify the discourses emerging in different threads into "causal" and "non-causal" types, as sumarized in the chart below. The causal discourses looked backward to the reason for the disaster, be it natural forces or human responsibility. It might generate tension of conflict when different social groups held contrasting views about "who is responsible for it." The non-causal discourses avoided that tension and looked forward to the post-disaster condition. It sought for benefit, transformation, comfort, or even moved a step further to the realm of practice and action.

Meaning-making	Causal	Non-causal
The state's responsibility and legitimacy	▪ The occurrence of the disaster is due to natural forces. ▪ The civil society sought for truth and justice regarding the problem of construction quality.	The state invested huge resource in the relief and reconstruction work, and then showcased its grand achievement.
Religious belief (Christianity)	▪ The disaster was a punishment upon sinners. ▪ The disaster was a message or a blessing.	▪ God loves and takes care of people who believe Him. ▪ The church should take actions to help people in need.
Trauma and recovery mediated by psychology	▪ Avoid causal issue	▪ Gaining new meaning of life ▪ Farewell ritual

The three threads of meaning-making represent the public/political, moral/spiritual, and individual/psychological dimension of meaning-making. The issue of the state's responsibility and legitimacy exists in the public/political sphere, in which the state and

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the civil society (especially parents who lost children) held contrasting forms of attribution. They took scientific knowledge as the fundamental worldview. They agreed that the occurrence of the earthquake was due to natural forces. However, the civil society sought for human factors that caused the high damage and casualties, which echoes the agenda of "sociodicy." It was a social conflict about the causal truth of the disaster. On the other hand, in order to maintain and boost its regime legitimacy, the state moved in a different direction, that is, to make a huge effort in the relief and reconstruction work, and used the achievement to justify its absolute reign. The pro-government discourse from the civil society also rendered the reconstruction as a benefit gained from the disaster.

The religious discourses concerned the moral or spiritual issues. The punitive theodicy regarded the disaster as a punishment upon sinners. It was a "moralizer" that made moral judgment upon either all humans or specific groups of people. It might stigmatize the victims and cause secondary harm to them. Similar to the problem of political responsibility in the first thread, it generated a controversy of "who is the sinner." As an alternative approach, the non-punitive theodicy saw the disaster as a message, a lesson, or a sign. However, one might still doubt whether the lesson really required that high price. The last type of religious discourse left out the problem of causality, and rather looked at the present and future. The believers in good faith sought consolation and comfort in God's love. The churches may mobilize to join the relief and reconstruction work, and thus fulfill their social role and responsibility.

Psychological intervention adopted an individualistic and non-causal methodology working in the private sphere. It does not talk about responsibility and sin. It treated

trauma as the individual's personal problem, and adopted professional techniques to help the clients release their emotions and go trough transformation. As a "psychologizer," it decoupled individual trauma from political and moral issues inherent in the former two threads. However, in doing so, it might render political issues irrelevant, and nullify the clients' right to seek truth and justice in the first thread.

The theodical meaning-makings studied in this chapter are institutional channels and resources. However, not all people really appealed to any of them for coping with suffering. Many survivors did not bother struggling with the problem of causality, and could still get through their troubles. On the contrary, many others could hardly move on, and could hardly gain relief from those channels of meaning-making. For instance, Lauren (H20, M, 37, junior high school), a Hanwang resident who ran small businesses and did manual labor, said: "I don't' think about that. It was a natural and human disaster. Why bother thinking about it? It happens when it is about to happen. Do [we] need to think about it? You don't want it to happen; but you can't change the reality. We are realistic. When it happens, face it. When we can't face it, we will see." It is a simple and straightforward opinion about the disaster. It quickly concludes that the disaster was made by both natural and human factors. But it does not dwell on the further and deeper task of meaning-making, and rather turns to realistic concerns and actions.

To sum up, the data presented in this chapter shows the diversity and uncertainty of theodical discourses. None of them could provide a universal answer that satisfies all people. Above all, to accept an answer is a matter of faith. One could be satisfied only if one believes something.

Chapter Five
Post-disaster Relief and Socialization Undertaken by Religious Organizations and Agents

In Chapter One, I summarize several kinds of "meaning purveyor" involved in post-disaster relief, reconstruction, and meaning-making. The central and local governments, the profession of psychology, and the volunteers and NGOs with diverse backgrounds and goals, and so on, all belong to the category of meaning purveyor. To examine the cultural and psychological recovery of local survivors, one needs to take the role of meaning purveyor into consideration. This chapter is devoted to study a specific group of them: the religious organizations and agents. I bring in the concept of "religious revival" as a background context, and introduce three kinds of religious organizations/agents, to see how they interacted with local survivors and offered support to them.

I. Background and literature

Shortly after the earthquake, a great number of individuals and organizations, either from within or outside the province, poured into the impacted zones to offer aid and support. Many of them had religious background. Driven by religious motives, they devoted huge efforts to post-disaster relief and recovery, providing material, social, and spiritual support to the local survivors. In this essay, I examine this phenomenon in two dimensions: First, I attempt to discover how the religious agents' features, goals, and obedience to governmental regulations influenced the way they offered support and interacted with local people. Second, I observe the extent of religious revitalization initiated by religious agents' endeavors in renovating churches, temples, and in religious teaching and evangelism.

This research fills a gap in the existing literature. Since the earthquake, much literature has been produced discussing the role of outside supporters in post-quake relief and reconstruction, especially nongovernment organizations (Han and Ji 2009; Huang, Zhou and Wei 2011; Roney 2011; Shieh and Deng 2011; Simon 2009; Teets 2009) and psychological intervention (Deng 2012; Shen 2009; Wang 2011; Xiao and Chen 2011b; Zhang and Zhang 2009). Only a few academic works look at the role of religion and faith-based organizations. For instance, a volume *Disaster and Humanitarian Concerns* (Min 2010) collects essays written about religious beliefs and traditional wisdom that explain the cause and meaning of disaster, and guide people to face and endure it. Liu and Liu (2009)[104] documents the actions of the Mianyang Buddhist community devoted to support earthquake survivors; and also surveyed the survivors, asking whether they wished the Buddhist sangha to conduct *chaodu* rituals [105] and rebuild the damaged temples, and whether their religious beliefs changed after the disaster. The result shows that most people have positive attitudes towards religion. Some psychological surveys (Cheng et al 2013; Kun et al 2010) examine whether religion, among several other variables, influences the survivors' mental health and recovery, though no significant result is found.

This chapter is based on an assumption: Religion, composed of a system of belief, practice, and social organization, provides explanations and assistance in response to human suffering throughout history. Although the Chinese Communist regime once repressed religions harshly, religion in China underwent revitalization in the reform

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[104] The research team of this survey is a social network composed of Buddhist community, governmental staffs, and scholars. They conducted survey in thirteen places in Mianyang area.

[105] "*Chaodu*" or "*chaojian*"is a Buddhist ritual popular in Chinese society. It attempts to summon the spirits of the dead, helping them to leave this world and move toward Heaven. It is helpful to the bereaved ones who are concerned with the destiny of the dead.

period. And it is worthwhile to study whether and how religions become involved in post-disaster relief and recovery in contemporary China.

This research makes use of data collected from fieldwork in Mianzhu and Mianyang, two of the most seriously damaged areas. I visited religious organizations/agents there, interviewed them, and observed their works and activities. I classify them into three types: (a) Local Christian and Buddhist communities which are recognized and administrated by the government. They are led by qualified pastors or monks/nuns. (b) NGOs established by religious believers after the earthquake, as so-called "faith-based organizations." Most of them came from other provinces. (c) Christian missionaries, either voluntary or sent by "house churches," which are not recognized by the government. They are the most eager to preach religious beliefs in disaster zones.

In the following sections, I make a brief literature review about religions in China, and the role religion could fulfill in post-disaster relief and recovery. And then I introduce my research design and findings.

Religions in China in the reform period: revival with secularization

Early sociologists, like Max Weber, predicted that religion would disappear in the near future due to modernization and secularization (Weber 1958, 1963; Berger 1967). This has not yet happened. Contemporary scholars witness the persistence and even revitalization of religion around the world (Stark and Finke 2000; Yang 2012).

Religions in China have undergone a huge fall and rise since the Communist regime took over the country. Several works have explored this issue, either concerned with religions in general, or certain religions specifically (Bays 2003; Chau 2011; Hunter and Chan 2007; Lee 2007; Luo 1991; Uhalley Jr and Wu 2001; Yang and Tamney 2005;

Yang 2008). During the Cultural Revolution, the state banned all kinds of religious belief, disbanded all religious organizations, and occupied properties and lands of temples and churches. Since the 1980s, the state has granted limited freedom of religious belief and activities under a set of regulations. Since then, religions in China revived in a peculiar relationship with the state. To summarize a few important policies and regulations here: First, the state approved five religions with long traditions and large populations of believers as legitimate: Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, and Daoism (In this essay, I only focus on Buddhist and Protestant groups). Any other is not approved. Second, the state recognized particular religious organizations as "patriotic" associations, such as Buddhist Association of China and Three-Self churches. They represent each religion as a unified entity, and serve as "bridges" through which the state administrates, controls, and negotiates with the religious communities. Third, all religious meetings and mission can only take place in registered sites, organized by legal association, and hosted by clergies or qualified believers[106].

The state-religion relationship is a crucial and tough issue for religions in China. Ji (2008) rethinks the term "secularization" and modifies its meaning to fit the specific context of contemporary China, using it to discuss the state-religion relationship. Talking about Buddhism in early Communist China, he suggests that "secularization essentially meant étatization or politicization…[The] human, material, and spiritual resources of Buddhism were controlled, appropriated, and used by the secular party-state according to its ideology and for its own political purposes (p.239)." However, since the1980s, the

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[106] The freedom and limit of religious belief is written in Article 36 of the 1982 Constitution of the PRC. Concrete regulations and principles can be seen in a set of legal documents and codes, such as *Document 19* of 1982, *Document 6* in 1991, and *Regulations on Religious Affairs* of 2004. Cheng (2003) and Potter (2003) provide detailed discussions about the background, contents, and effects of these regulations.

Buddhist community had been able to negotiate with the state for its legal rights and interests, and even adapt that "secular" philosophy to boost its own reconstruction and development.

Things are more complicated for Protestantism. Protestant churches in China are divided into three categories: Three-Self churches (the only legal one), house churches, and heretic churches. This essay touches on both Three-Self churches and house churches. The "three-self" slogan was in the beginning a mission agenda to organize native Christians in non-western countries into "self-supporting, self-governing, and self propagating" churches to attain local autonomy. After the CCP took over China in 1949, it manipulated that agenda into "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" and tried to put Protestant churches into its own control. A group of church leaders collaborated with the state to establish a nation-wide system of Three-Self churches (*sanzi jiaohui*), which expresses loyalty to the Communist state, and subjects itself to the state's control, while cutting ties with foreign missionary enterprises, an element of western imperialism (Lee 2007)[107]. Meanwhile, many other churches refused to accept state control, in order to maintain spiritual and theological purity and autonomy. They have been rendered illegal. The clergies and missionaries suffered from governmental repression, detention, and persecution, especially during the Cultural Revolution. However, these "house churches" (*jiating jiaohui*) are more ambitious than Three-Self churches in evangelism (since they tend to ignore the regulation about legal sites of preaching), contributing to the expansion and revival of Christianity in China.

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[107] Lee (2007:492) points out that Three-Self churches are subject to "monitoring by the state, required political study for pastors, certain restrictions on acceptable topics for preaching and intervention in church personnel matters." In my fieldwork, it is partly, though not completely confirmed, perhaps due to historical change and local differences. The point is that Three-self churches do not enjoy full autonomy and freedom, and need to compromise with the state in their religious beliefs and management.

In spite of state regulations mentioned above, religions in China underwent significant revival in the reform period, expressed in the increase of believer/clergy population, religious events and publications, as well as renovation and rebuilding of temples and churches. As for Protestantism, the official statistic indicates that the population of believers increased from 3 million in 1982 to 16 million in 2009; and the number of clergy from 5.9 to 37 thousand (Yang 2012). Estimations of believer population from other sources range from 16 to 80 million (see footnote 2 in Wielander (2009)). As for Buddhism, there is no clear, precise number of believers, since Buddhism is pervasively rooted in Chinese culture. However, the number of monks/nuns increased from 27 thousand in 1982 to 200 thousand in 2009 (Yang 2012).

The cause and nature of the revival is complicated, related to political, cultural and economic factors in the progress of modernization and the development of market economy. Yang's research on urban Protestant churches (2005) attempts to explain the widespread conversion to Christianity in China. He concludes that facing the uncertainty caused by the globalized market economy, and disappointment with political repression, many young people find peace, certainty, and liberating power in Christianity. Other literature (Cao 2007; Lee 2007; Wielander 2009) notices the rising community of Protestant intellectuals, lawyers, professionals, and private entrepreneurs. They project upon Christianity a modern, progressive, idealistic image; also they make use of their cultural and social capital, gained in their careers, to play active roles in evangelism or church management.

Another sign of religious revival is renovation and construction of temples, as well as religious and secular activities hosted by temples, which become attractions for tourists

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and worshippers (Borchert 2005; Lang, Chan and Ragvald 2005; Yang and Wei 2005). Chan and Lang (2011) study the construction and management of two Doaist temples in Guangdong and Zhejiang provinces. The temple managers, who were once secular entrepreneurs, cooperated with local officials, treating the new temples as enterprises that could contribute to economic development through tourism and enhance the cultural prestige of the regions.

From the research findings shown above, one can single out some factors involved in the religious revival in China. On the demand side, religion can be a spiritual resource that the believers pursue and count on to overcome the uncertainty and injustice experienced in real life. On the supply side, the temple or church managers also make efforts, with innovation and modern entrepreneurship, to promote the religious enterprise through tourism and mission. In this trend, religious beliefs and practices are intertwined with secular elements, such as economic interests and political vision.

As mentioned above, throughout history, religion had contributed much in the symbolic and practical dimension to coping with human suffering and disaster. Is this still true today? How does religion respond to disasters in modern society, and does disaster increase people's need for religion, and thus cause religious revival to a certain extent?

The role of religion in responses to disaster

Religion could respond to disaster in many different ways, from the symbolic dimension of meaning-making to practical dimensions of aid offering, charity work, and so on. I briefly review them above.

(1) Meaning-making: Facing unendurable suffering, humans tend to ask questions about its cause and meaning: Why is there suffering? Why me? Do I deserve it? What should I

do? I have discussed this topic in Chapter Four, with the concept of "theodicy." It is believed that interest in theodicy has declined in western modern societies under the influence of secularization (Weber 1963, 1958; Berger 1967; Kleinman 1997; Morgan and Wilkinson 2001). However, empirical researches in non-western societies still witness its enduring existence (Adeney-Risakotta 2009; Chester and Duncan 2010; Falk 2010; Shweder 2008).

Besides theodicy, religions provide ontologies about life and death, a more complete worldview that teaches people to cope with loss, especially death of loved ones. In response to the Sichuan earthquake, Zheng (2010) suggests that religious wisdom, like concepts of nirvana and redemption, might help people "gain deep understanding about 'life' and 'death,' bringing huge consolation to the bereaved (p.283)"

(2) Religious practice: During and after the earthquake, religious believers might pray for their safety and the end of the disaster (Liu and Liu 2009; Mitchell 2003). Religious organizations and clergies might arrange public rituals of prayer, memorial ceremonies, and *chaodu* (see footnote 4), in order to comfort the survivors, helping them cope with grief, and bring hope to them. For instance, after the 9.21 earthquake in Taiwan in 1999, Buddhist sangha from Fuoguangshan performed *chaodu* rituals in the earthquake site, even right around the collapsed buildings because many people died there (Shiyikong 1999).

(3) Provision of support: Religious organizations or agents, based on their altruistic ethos, accessible resource, and missionary ambition, might mobilize to participate in relief work, and subsequent work in the reconstruction stage. The goods or contents they offer vary largely, depending on the needs of local survivors, and the goal or plan of the

organizations. They might provide material support, such as food, commodities, housing construction, and monetary support to people in need. They might also provide emotional support, accompanying survivors in sorrow, offering comfort and consolation.

(4) Cultural cultivation: In my fieldwork, I found that religious organizations brought many kinds of cultural, moral, and educational programs to local survivors, such as Chinese philosophy (*guoxue*), character education, environmental protection for earth and for mind, etc, in the form of lecture series or summer camps. Besides these secular programs, some organizations or agents also preach religious beliefs in the public or private spheres. These practices can be seen as a kind of socialization, by which the religious organizations introduce to their clients whatever they want them to learn.

Three kinds of organizations or agents are possible "carriers" of symbolic and practical support listed above: (a) Local churches and temples, organized by clergies and active members; (b) faith-based organizations; (c) missionaries. Items (a) and (c) are clear concepts understandable to most readers. "Faith-based organization" (FBO) requires more clarification. It generally refers to any organization whose goals and management are decided or influenced by religious factors. Ebaugh et al (2006) single out three dimensions of "religiosity" in FBO: *Service religiosity*: the FBO staffs share religious message or practices to the clients. *Staff religiosity*: the staffs' recruitment and work ethic are influence by religious beliefs. *Organizational religiosity*: the organization shows the public its religious nature. Different FBOs might score differently on these dimensions.

A FBO might offer secular support and service alone, or also preach religious beliefs, depending on its policy and priority. In fact, the rise of contemporary charitable NGO has religious roots. As Fountain et al (2004:323) reviews:

[The] current boom in nongovernmental organizations can be traced back to a 'missionary

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phase' of Christian individuals and organization, stretching from 1860 to the 1960s. Many contemporary development projects have their origins in the desire of these people to propagate the Christian faith by building and funding a number of aid and development initiatives, including hospitals, schools and other formal and informal activities.

As shown below, these practices also occurred in the relief and reconstruction work after the Sichuan earthquake, undertaken by different religious organizations.

II. Research design

Yang (2005) summarizes three levels of factors that influence the market of religion: the structural level, the organizational level, and the individual level. He found that economic uncertainty and political repression could be structural factors that increase people's need for religion. I postulate that disaster is at least a potential structural factor that might increase the need for religion. However, the organizational factor, that is, the effort of religious organizations in offering emotional and spiritual support, is also crucial, and is the focus of this essay. Based on background knowledge reviewed above, I set up my own research questions in two dimensions: First, What kinds of service or support did different religious organizations/agents offer, based on their features, goals, and obedience to regulations? What relationship did they establish with the local survivors? Second, have the religious organizations/agents working in the earthquake sites initiated religious "revival" in any sense? I introduce my research sites, target organizations, and research methods as below.

1. Background of the research sites

The data were collected in Mianzhu City, Beichuan County, and nearby areas. The religious believers constitute a significant part, though not the majority, of the whole population.

Beichuan County has a population of 237953[108]. It has many different ethnic groups: Han, Hui, Qiang, and Zang; and has religious beliefs and meeting points of all five religions recognized by the state (reviewed above). According to an academic survey conducted by the Institution of Taoism and Religious Culture (2009), Beichuan County has 300 Catholics, 600 Muslims, 1000 Protestants, 60000 Buddhists and 10000 Daoists. There are one Three-Self Protestant church and several Buddhist temples in the county.

On the other hand, Mianzhu City is a county-level city, having 19 towns and 2 townships, with a population of 520000[109]. the researcher has not yet found statistics for Buddhist believers. But similar to any city in Sichuan, there are several temples around the urban and rural areas. The Three-Self church has 25 meeting points and about 1000 believers.

Liu and Liu (2009) surveyed the attitudes of survivors in Beichuan towards religions after the earthquake. 70% of respondents ever saw clergy of any religion participating in relief works and emotional consolation. Most non-believers preferred psychologists or political workers to undertake emotional consolation, while most Buddhists preferred sanghas to do it. As for a shift in religious attitude after the earthquake, 21.8% of non-believers had good impression of, and might convert to Buddhism. 10% of the respondents were once Buddhists but abandoned their beliefs after the earthquake. 91% of Buddhists reported that their beliefs became stronger.

2. Organizations, networks, and agencies

The serious damage and loss caused a need in survivors to seek for material and emotional support. Religious organizations, along with other secular organizations,

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[108] The number comes from the official website of Beichuan County: http://beichuan.gov.cn/html/zjbc/
[109] Official website of Mianzhu Government: http://www.mianzhu.gov.cn/Index.html

served as suppliers of supports. In this section, I describe the religious organizations I studied in the research sites.

(a) Local religious groups

Most local temples and churches located in Mianzhu, Beichuan and even Mianyang City were damaged to various degrees. They are both supporters and victims. On the one hand, they organized relief work, emotional support, and religious services to help the survivors staying in temporary shelters or hometowns. On the other hand, in order to repair or reconstruct the temples and churches, the clergies, sanghas, and congregations needed to make effort to gather resource from other patrons.

As the chart shows, in Beichuan and Mianyang area I visited and interviewed three Buddhist temples and their head clergy; two Three-self Protestant churches and their pastors; and two governmental staff members in charge of religious affairs. They all participated in relief works directed at survivors from Beichuan County. In Mianzhu I participated in the Three-self church and interviewed a few believers. Besides interviewing, I also collected internal documents and publications issued by these organizations which are helpful to understand the details of their works and plans. I list the religious organizations and agents I interviewed below. I use real names to refer to most of them, accept for two governmental staff members, whom I use codes to label. Of course, in the interviews, they often refer to other agents who are important in the field.

Organization	Agent for interview
Guanglian Temple, Beichuan County	Master Daocheng
Ziliang Temple, Beichuan County	Master Longxu
Lianhua Temple, Mianyang City	Master Zhaozong
Three-self Church of Beichuan County	Paster Luo
Three-self Church of An County	Paster Ma
Governmental sectors of Mianyang City and Beichuan County	Two staffers: G1, G2.
Three-self Church of Mianzhu City	A few believers

(b) Faith-based organizations

Most FBOs and their staffs I found in the field came from outside Sichuan province. Some of them are well-established organizations which already existed before the earthquake, and even had experience of relief work, such as two Buddhist-based organizations from Taiwan, Tzu Chi and Fagushan. Some others were established by outside volunteers after they came to Sichuan to join the relief work. Many FBOs came to Sichuan shortly after the earthquake, and are still there now, though the composition of their staffs might change through time. They plan to do charity and service works for a long time. Most FBOs dedicate most of their efforts to secular services, like material support, monetary support, educational programs, and so on. However, they might deliver religious messages in their services in subtle ways.

Organization	Agent for interview
Tzu Chi service centers	Chief staffs
Wonder Bless	John (leader); Mary (worker)

I interviewed one staffer of Tzu Chi work station in Wudu town, Mianzhu in summer 2011; and two staffers of a Protestant-based organization, as listed below. The latter are affiliated with "house churches" not recognized by the state; hence I use false names to refer to them, in order to avoid causing political risk to them.

(c) Missionaries

After the earthquake, many missionaries and Christian volunteers came to the disaster zones. Driven by strong ambition for evangelism, they attempted to preach Christianity to local people. Although it is against the state's regulation, some of them still managed to stay for a long time and establish little "house churches" with local converts. Missionaries (*chuandaoren*) differ from ordinary believers or FBO worker in that they

received a significant amount of training in theology. They are expected to have strong faith in God and good knowledge about the Bible. However, in reality, most of them did more than just preaching Gospel and leading churches. They sometimes collaborated with other FBOs on short-term programs and services, which might be secular in nature. They might even develop secular businesses to help local people earn their living. In this essay, I use interviews with three missionaries in Beichuan County.

The Protestant FBOs and missionaries I visited in adjacent regions (Mianzhu City, An County, Beichuan County, Mianyang City, and so on) formed a loose network. They see each other in occasional training programs and group activities, and share information and support each other when needed.

In the next sections, I will describe the concrete works undertaken by the religious organizations and agents listed above. I combine related interviews and textual data, making up integrated narratives, and only quote certain agents' words when it is needed.

In general, all religious organizations might provide material support, cultural and moral cultivation, and religious preaching in some way. But there is variation in emphasis. Some of them emphasize material support and do not preach religious beliefs very much, some are eager to preach religious beliefs. Shortly after the disaster, material and emotional support are of urgent need. As time went by and the survivors gradually resumed normal life, the organizations tended to shift their effort to cultural cultivation.

III. Research findings

(A) Local religious groups

The great suffering and loss caused by the disaster create needs in the survivors for

material, emotional, and spiritual support. Along with other religious and secular NGO, local temples and churches made efforts to satisfy this need. Also, since they themselves were severely damaged, they desperately needed vast resource for reconstruction.

Buddhist associations and temples

Influx of outside resources

The actions of the Buddhist community involved a network of many different organizations and agents. The Mianyang Buddhist Association is a city-level organization that coordinates and supervises the temples and sanghas in the city. The Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau (*minzongju*) is a governmental sector that makes policies and administrates the religious affairs of all religions. And last, there is a group of scholars and academic institutions that provides intellectual resources for the Buddhist community in question.

The earthquake caught the attention of the local, national, and overseas Buddhist societies; and hence caused an influx of outside resources into seriously damaged regions like Beichuan. Besides material support, the influx of human resources is also important. For instance, a significant Buddhist figure born in Beichuan, Master Daojian, had been the chief of Huayan Temple in Chongqin. After the earthquake, he came back to Beichuan to join the relief work. He later took charge of Guo'en Temple, a seriously damaged, historical temple located in New Beichuan capitol. Second, a former physician in Mianyang City, Huang Ling, also a voluntary staffer of Mianyang Buddhist Association, organized relief work after the earthquake. In 2009, she saw beyond (*kanpuo*) and abandoned her secular life. Ordained and renamed as Master Daocheng, she took charge of Guanglian Temple in Beichuan County. Third, in 2010, Master Longxu, a nun

once serving in Chongqin, came to New Beichuan and took charge of Ziliang Temple, another heavy damaged temple. These people are young, well-educated human resources flowing from outside and dedicating themselves to temple reconstruction and spiritual cultivation in Beichuan.

Psychological comfort

Shortly after the 5.12 earthquake, the Mianyang Buddhist Association organized the temples, sanghas, and believers to participate in the relief work, bringing material support to people in need. The Association brought hot food to survivors gathered in Jiuzhou Stadium, most of whom came from Beichuan. They summoned a team of monks, scholars, and believers, to conduct psychological intervention and consolation for the survivors. According to Master Daocheng, the survivors struggled with loss of property and death of loved ones; many worried about the missing. Since so many people were in need, the team gave up one-to-one counseling and adopted lecture sessions instead.

The monks used Buddhist concepts to explain disaster and death, such as the impermanence of life (*shengming wuchang*), the fragility of earth, and the mechanism of causality (*yinguo*), saying the earthquake was caused by people's collective karma (gongye), e.g., committing killing in the precedent lives. In my interview, Daocheng also shared a worldview that attributes physical change to the human mind: "When the society and human mind go bad, the environment also goes bad. If human do not love the environment, natural and man-made disasters will come to you." Then she talked about global warming and environmental protection.

Buddhism also answers questions about death. In my interview, Master Zhaozong recalled that a governmental official, who lost his wife and daughter in the earthquake,

tried to starve himself, and psychological intervention was in vain. The official asked the master: "I think that human becomes nothing after his death, so it is meaningless for me to keep alive. How does Buddhism talk about death?" The master answered: "A human's body dies, yet his spirit exists forever…Your wife did not die, she went to another space and path." The official accepted this idea and started to eat. Another similar story came from governmental staffer G1: About forty children in an elementary school died in the earthquake. The principal thought it was her responsibility and felt guilty about it. A Buddhist master told her that "You are a Bodhisattva, the dead are Great Bodhisattvas[110]. You still have lots of works to do." It helped her get over the trauma and engage herself in relief work. Her endeavor was appreciated by superiors, and she got promoted later. Such stories indicate the power of religion in helping people to face loss and death. Its healing power is not only cognitive, but also emotional and practical. It soothes people's wound and sorrow, and encourages them to resume their works and daily lives.

The sanghas also performed *chaodo* and prayer rituals, as well as lectures on Buddhist philosophy in public. For instance, the Beichuan Buddhist Association invited Master Haitao from Taiwan to host *chaodu* and prayer rituals, and give lectures at Guo'en Temple at the earthquake anniversaries in 2010 and 2011. His lectures taught people to be grateful to others (including the state), and follow the logic of karma e.g., be altruistic and kind to others, so to fulfill one's own well-being[111]. The presence of governmental officials in these meetings shows the government's acceptance of Buddhism as a positive

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[110] Bodhisattva is a category of Buddhist deities. They have higher wisdom than humans do, but choose to postpone their paths of becoming Buddha, and keep staying on earth to help humans gain wisdom.
[111] Master Haitao's lectures can be found online:
"Happiness of Life:" http://www.fodizi.com/fofa/list/4358.htm
"The Prayer and Chaojian Rituals:" http://vod.goodweb.cn/v/video_view.asp?newsid=3059
"Accomplishment of Four Dharma:" http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/0-XB8Sb_SyM/

cultural resource to maintain the harmony and peace of the society[112].

Reconstruction and moral cultivation

Several religious sites in Beichuan County were seriously damaged in the earthquake, and needed repair or reconstruction. An unpublished survey indicates that 48.6% of Buddhists and 93.2% of Protestants in Beichuan agree that reconstruction of religious places is an urgent issue. Temple reconstruction is not something banal; rather, it is crucial for resuming and even upgrading the temple's function, that is, spiritual and cultural cultivation. As Master Zhaozong said: "Now the most important thing is to construct the temple, and then host training and practicing programs [in it], to get back our heart. We live in illusions…desires, and worry. We will teach these lessons, the morality of life." This passage shows his ambition to correct the moral decadence in modern society, and he needs a place to do it. Such moral idealism is not uncommon in the history of religion, and disaster seemed to boost the clergy's ambition to deploy the enterprise of moral education.

The County Government invited scholars in Sichuan Universities and other institutions to form a research team. They visited the whole county and made surveys, and then produced a set of findings and detailed suggestions for religious reconstruction. Before the earthquake, Beichuan had believers of all five legal religions. But the religious organizations and activities were ill-integrated and under-developed. The team suggested the religious communities integrate together and follow an overall plan for reconstruction. They pointed out some niches for religions in Beichuan to upgrade, such as cultural heritage, moral teaching, charity works, literature and art, tourism, environmental

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[112] Liu and Liu's survey (2009) indicates that 97.3% of Buddhists were satisfied with the Party and government, a rate much higher than ordinary people. The researchers interprets that Buddhists are more able to "have gratitude." It affirms the "patriotic" nature of religions under the state's manipulation.

protection, and so on[113]. It is a grand plan. No matter how many of these suggestions can be realized, the whole research work itself was a mobilization of intellectual resources aiming at religious revival in Beichuan.

After the earthquake, Beichuan County received much outside support and attention. The state has invested huge resources in its reconstruction. According to governmental staffer G2, the central state allocated 20,590,000 RMB for Beichuan County for reconstructing 13 legal religious places. However, it is largely inadequate to complete the work. The leaders of each religious place still need to raise money from believers and the general public (entrepreneurs especially) on their own. This task obviously occupies much of the time and energy of the temple leaders.

As reviewed above, there are outside human resources flowing to Beichuan, including Maser Daojian, Daocheng, and Longxu. They undertook the heavy duty of temple reconstruction, and cultivating the spiritual life of local believers. These are quite challenging tasks for them. For instance, Master Longxu came to manage Ziliang Temple in 2010. She endured the poor living conditions of the temple: lacking water and power supply, roof leaking, and floods. She managed to reconstruct the temple step by step. Besides, she organized lectures of traditional philosophies (*guoxue*), teaching people to "apply Buddhism in daily life, to get rid of suffering and worry, to deal with family relationship, to bring compassion and wisdom to the society."

Three-self Protestant Churches

I visited three Three-self churches in Mianzhu, Beichuan, and An County. I interviewed the chief pastors of Beichuan church and An church, and some believers of

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[113] This description is summarized from internal documents produced by the research institutions and circulated in the governmental sectors.

Mianzhu church. Their responses to the earthquake generally resembles those of Buddhist groups, including relief work, spiritual comfort, and church reconstruction.

The Mianzhu church association administrates 25 meeting points in suburban and rural areas, with totally 5000 believers. In the church's internal volume on earthquake relief, an essay documented the real-time experience of believers in the Hanwang meeting point (Gu 2009). More than 20 believers were attending worship service. Suddenly the earthquake occurred, they could not stand. They crawled – praying – and reached the door. After the earthquake, they found that the small, humble meeting point was intact, and many seemingly sturdy buildings collapsed. Actually, Hanwang town was overall severely damaged. The believers felt that their survival was because God heard their prayers and protected them. The essay sighed that "Life is in God's hand," "How many people can predict and control on their own, and claim themselves as the master of Nature?" It cites a verse from Bible to express human fragility: "Stop trusting in mere humans, who have but a breath in their nostrils. Why hold them in esteem? (*Isaiah* 2:22)" It was a "meaning-making" about life and death that helped people to explain life events. As a result, the intactness of Hanwang meeting point has been rendered a miracle that strengthened the believers' faith in God.

In response to the severe damage in the Mianzhu area, the national Three-self church system organized the relief work, delivering material supplies to places in need. Overseas Christian organizations arrived as well. According to my interview, the supply deliveries were arranged at meeting points. All people, regardless of religious belief, were allowed to receive the supplies. Church leaders coming from everywhere might address or host meetings accompanying the delivery service. For instance, shortly after the earthquake, a

leader from Chengdu reminded the villagers to harvest and store the crops so they could have something to eat. It was a practical suggestion with no religious concern. On the other hand, there were worship and evangelical meetings as well, arranged right before the supply delivery, in order to summon new converts[114]. Probably some villagers were reluctant or calculating to attend these meetings. One of my informants recalled that one day, about three months after the earthquake, she was on the way to a meeting point. She invited some villagers on the road to the meeting. The latter asked: "How much money do you give me?"

Church reconstruction is also an important issue. The historical Mianzhu church located in the city was built in 1923. Before the earthquake, there were about 100-200 people attending the weekly Sunday service. The earthquake damaged it partially, and it could not accommodate meetings until repaired. The church leaders moved the worship service to an outdoor space, and then to a temporary steel house. During this post-disaster period, the attendance of worship meetings rose to over one thousand people. The clergy used psalms and scriptures to console and strengthen people's minds. In order to serve the enlarged congregation, the leaders raised funds to build a new, much larger and splendid church in a new site. And they are now still building a supplemental building (to include a restaurant, reception center, and classrooms) with a tight budget. However, after the new church was open and started to host worship service in 2011, the attendance gradually fell to the pre-earthquake level. Things are yet different in suburban and rural meeting points. According to my observation and the believers' description, the congregation in these meeting points also underwent growth after the earthquake, and had remained steady. This local difference shows the uneven effect of post-disaster missions.

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[114] It was legal since it was held in legal meeting points.

The stories of the Churches of Beichuan and An County are similar. They are among the Three-self church system and participated in the relief work in a well-organized way. They offered material supply, medical service, psychological counseling, and so on. The church of Beichuan County was partially damaged, and had been repaired later. The church of An County was originally a small meeting point and collapsed due to the earthquake. The leaders built a new, larger church in a new space. Both churches received funds from the government and other Christian-based institutions.

About mission work after the disaster, Pastor Luo says that they do not deliberately impose beliefs upon others, yet preaching the Gospel is a lifetime mission. During the relief work, the church helped people in need, regardless of their religious belief. Many non-believers were touched by the church's service and care. They saw it as a manifestation of God's love, and then converted as Christians. This "implicit mission" through service, rather than explicit preaching, echoes the experiences of faith-based organizations and missionaries discussed in the next sections.

However, both Pastor Luo and Ma reported a rise and fall of church attendance. There was a boom of conversion shortly after the earthquake, but many did not continue to attend the meetings (an indicator of one's religious faith) in the long run. The pastors speculated that it was probably because the new converts were attracted by material support in the early years, which no longer continues now. However, informants of all three churches reviewed above affirmed that people who already had strong faith in God before the earthquake tended to remain firm in their faith. This observation echoes the survey on Buddhists reviewed above, which shows that only few Buddhists abandoned their belief after the earthquake. Then the "rise and fall" of church attendance was

supposed to be caused by the new, unstable converts. If it is confirmed by further research, then we can conclude that post-disaster missions could create short-term increase of conversion; but the churches have limited and uneven capacity to maintain the long-term adherence of its congregation.

(B) Faith-based Organizations

Many NGOs that came to Sichuan shortly after the earthquake and still work there at present (and will stay there for a few years) have religious backgrounds. Either their leaders or the whole staffs are religious believers. They are called "faith-based organizations" (FBO). They basically offer secular services to the public, including material, emotional, and cultural supports. Due to the government's regulation, the FBOs are not allowed to preach religion when they contact and deal with local survivors. However, they still spread religious messages in subtle ways, if they want to. I interviewed staffs of several FBOs, and participated in the activities of one Protestant FBO. In this section, I introduce two of them.

The first is Buddhist Tzu Chi Association[115], a charity FBO based in Taiwan. It was established by Master Zhengyan in 1966 to help people in need. In its long history, backed by a strong ability to raise monetary and human resources, it developed charity services of multiple types, e.g., home care, medical support, disaster relief, environmental protection, building schools and hospitals, etc. It has undertaken disaster relief around the world, including South Asia, Africa, China, and the U.S.; and became a well-experienced and well-institutionalized global enterprise.

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[115] In Taiwan, the Romanized name of the organization is spelled as "Tzu Chi" (慈济). It equals to "Ciji" in the spelling system used in PRC. In order to respect the original naming of the organization, I always use "Tzu Chi" to refer to it. My description about Tzu Chi is based on its publication (Ling and Xie 2009), and interviews with two leading staffs of the service centers in Sichuan.

Shortly after the Sichuan earthquake, Tzu Chi set up two service centers in Luoshui and Hanwang town. The team offered almost all kinds of support and services, such as cooked warm food, daily commodities, medical and mental care, clothes and blankets in winter, and gifts for Chinese New Year, etc. These were not just material supplies; they touched the survivors' heart and gave them warmth. Besides giving supports, Tzu Chi also recruited local people to join their ranks. For instance, they invited a few survivors, mostly females who lost loved ones, working with them to prepare and serve food in the temporary housing camp. It helped them forget their sorrow, and feel their lives as meaningful and valuable, at least temporarily.

Tzu Chi served people of different religious beliefs. Their staffs and volunteers are not sangha but ordinary people. However, they adopt Buddhist language and rules in daily practice, such as vegetarian meals, table manners, and the way they address each other. They also provide moral cultivation infused with implicit religious ideas. For instance, the service center distributed *Words of Peaceful Thoughts* (*Jingsiyülu*), a little pamphlet written by Master Zhengyan about the philosophy of life, teaching people to lead a harmonious and peaceful life with each other. For the last three years, they have promoted an agenda of environmental protection and weekly trash recycles in local neighborhoods. Their handout connects material environment with spiritual virtue, and uses Buddhist ontology to explain sufferings and disasters on earth. It encourages people to have hearts of gratitude, respect, and love; and do good things to reduce disasters and global warming.

The following sections will focus on Protestant organizations and agents. The disaster provoked ambition or calling in churches and believers. Many Christians thought of the

meaning of the disaster (e.g., punishment, revelation, sign of Apocalypse), and what they could do in response to it. This calling led them to the devotion of charity work and mission.

"Wonder Bless" is a Protestant voluntary group, in which I interviewed the founder, John; and a senior fellow worker, Mary[116]. In August 2008, John established "Wonder Bless" in Sichuan in a temporary housing camp (*banfangqu*) in Mianzhu, with around 20 fellow workers. The major focus of their service is aimed at children and adolescents. They organized libraries, study groups, character education (*pinge jiaoyu*), English classes, summer and winter camps. Besides, they also undertook home care, family counseling, community activities, some of which I personally witnessed in the field. In the early years, they arranged job-training classes for survivors to learn skills which might bring them a job, like cooking, sewing, and haircut. John commented that it was not only for the job's sake; it is also a psychological healing that made people get over hard times and learn how to face the future.

Religious belief plays an important role in Wonder Bless, compared with other FBOs. It basically collaborated with and received funding from organizations with a religious background, like churches, schools, and other FBOs; since its emphasis on evangelism would conflict with secular organizations. One exception is the local government, which needed their contribution in community work and family support.

All fellow workers are Christians, mostly young people from other provinces. Every morning they read Bible and pray together. They held worship service every Sunday, like a small church in itself. John has a clear philosophy about his career in public welfare. He

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[116] Both names are alias. The term "fellow worker" (*tonggong*) is a Christian term referring to believers carrying any duty of service or work in a church or FBO.

has been concerned with moral decadence, mammonism, corruption, decline of marriage and family, defects of education, etc, that accompanied economic development in contemporary China. He felt that the whole of China is a disaster zone, and the Sichuan earthquake moved him to see and think about it. He then abandoned his previous work in Beijing and came to rural areas in Sichuan. He followed God's calling to devote himself as "light and salt" for the society. In this sense, he sees the earthquake as God's *bless* that made people think about the meaning of life, and bring some change to the society.

As a NGO focusing on charity and community work, Wonder Bless does not openly and frequently preach the Gospel. They helped the survivors get over their hard times by companionship and services. Similar to Tzu Chi, the base of Wonder Bless was located right in the temporary housing camp (arranged by the government) until early 2011 when the survivors moved to the new town. They lived amidst survivors. When there was a flood around the camp, they too confronted it. Talking about serving those who suffered from loss, bereavement, and helplessness, John emphasized on "company" (*peiban*), devoting one's own life, time, and love, to accompany and cry with them. As Mary recalled, in early days, they either walked around the camp or followed the government's information, to see what they could do for people in need. For those who were shocked and sank in deep sorrow, they accompanied and talked to them day to day, and helped them rejoin the community and normal life. In this sense, it is the fellow worker's sympathetic company, rather than explicit massage of Gospel, that worked to heal the sorrow.

However, mission did happen in private and closed circles. According to Mary, the way they preached the Gospel was through gradual familiarity and trust. In the first year,

they delivered material supplies in the camp, and gained rapport with survivors. Since 2009, they started to preach the Gospel to those seemingly in need, like women, aged people, confused adolescents, and seriously injured patients. They said something like "There is a God, He loves you and will come to help you and give you happiness." They did not link the Gospel to the earthquake, but rather brought a message that the Gospel could help survivors. About 20 people converted due to their preaching. They introduced the converts to nearby churches to join the religious life. People who rejected the Gospel often had reasons like: They believed in Buddhism for generations; they were busy in building house and rearing children; they did not understand it, and so on.

According to my own participant observation and interviews with local survivors, many natives did establish lasting friendship with fellow workers in Wonder Bless, as a fruit of emotional support and all kinds of service and education program they offered. A few found new hopes and meaning of life, either through their company or the Gospel. However, it is not easy for new converts to maintain a regular religious life, e.g., attending worship meeting and reading Bible regularly.

The "religiosity" of different FBOs varies greatly. In order to gain more knowledge about FBOs, I made contact with other two Protestant FBOs in Sichuan, who also offered services that closely contacted survivors; and interviewed their staffs. Both of them do not exclusively recruit Christians to work for them. And they alertly disallow the fellow workers to preach Gospel in their service, lest it should influence the legitimacy of organization. However, one FBO staff, Phoebe, said that "You can use deeper and truer love in the service, to do the service better, and to realize Jesus' love in the service." Both staffs noticed the unique quality of Christian workers: they stayed longer than non-

Christians in places with bad living conditions; they were more caring and considerate to the clients even than non-Christian professional social workers were. It echoes John's philosophy. I would like to reserve my comments on this issue. It is beyond the scope of this essay to evaluate the effectiveness of any religious organization, not to mention comparing them with secular organizations, which calls for delicate research design and large survey[117].

(C) Missionaries

I interviewed three Protestant missionaries in Beichuan County. I use false names to refer to them: Debbie, Paul, and Mark. They are affiliated with house churches and have no legal rights to preach the Gospel and host worship meetings. Their mission was a challenging task. They needed to figure out a proper way to gain the trust of local people and lead churches without being expelled by the authorities. It requires innovation and patience. As mentioned above, none of them treated evangelism as a full-time career. They also undertook other secular services. As articulated by Phoebe in the last section, doing service is also a way to spread God's love. The three missionaries came to Beichuan in 2008 and 2009. They offered physical, monetary, and emotional support to local survivors and then preached Gospel to them in certain ways.

In the beginning, when the missionaries came to the disaster zones, they needed to seek for their "niche," to see where and how they can make what contribution. They went deep into rural and even mountainous villages, far outreaching the limited domain of legal clergies. They were pioneers who explored new worlds where no one has gone before. After they selected a place to stay, they lived and worked with local people, with close social distance. Similar to FBO workers, "sympathetic company" is an important means

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[117] Wuthnow and his colleagues' work (2004) is an exemplary research on this issue.

for gaining trust of local people.

Debbie was once engaged in evangelism in Chengdu City. She developed good social skills to approach different kinds of people and show her care for them. She did not receive funding from a church and hence needed to find her own way of living. She arrived at Beichuan in 2008, working in quite a few villages and towns. Debbie collaborated with other volunteers to perform many services, including material supply, tent kindergarten, and a communal library. Her "niche" of missionary work is a humble gesture and at close social distance with natives. She owns a small business there to earn a living, as many natives do, and had to suffer everything the natives suffered. She chatted with people and find out their "need," especially spiritual need that originates from troubles in daily life and family relationship, and then shared some suggestions. Through this intimate care and communication, she gradually guided the client toward the Gospel.

According to Debbie's observation, some mission organizations brought huge resources into disaster zones. They were too conspicuous and caught the authorities' attention, and were then expelled by the latter. Also, their identity as full-time, self-sufficient missionaries caused social distance with the natives, making it hard to gain their trust. On the contrary, fellow workers and missionaries with humble resource tended to do better in evangelism, since they tended to be socially closer and considerate to the natives. However, in order to maintain a good relationship with the government, Debbie does not lead worship meetings and leaves this duty to other missionaries.

Both Paul and Mark's missionary work were facilitated by joining local people's reconstruction work. Paul collaborated with an outside construction team to build light-

steel houses (*qinggangfang*) for people living in a mountainous village. Mark also devoted his own labor to help a villager build his house, and then got to know people in the area. According to Paul's interview, there were some moments that opened chances for sharing the Gospel with strangers. For instance, when local people asked fellow workers why they did this, they would say they are Christians and ought to help people in need. Also, when they tried to console people in bereavement, they naturally mentioned ideas about God, and would pray for the bereaved if the latter did not mind. Still, company and listening, rather than explicitly preaching, were the most important and effective supports at those sad moments.

According to Paul's estimation, missionaries coming after 2008 have established more than ten meeting points in Beichuan County, with totally about 200 local converts. The number of regular attendees in each point is small, ranging from less than five to a little more than ten. Both Paul and Mark were frustrated by the local entrance barrier against Christianity, such as the tradition of Buddhism, folk religion, and official atheism. Second, it is not easy to gain trust and understanding from natives, unless one devotes huge amount of time and care to them. Some natives might think that the missionaries' purpose of offering help is to preach. Third, because of the illegal nature of their mission, both missionaries reported the experience of being inspected by the police.

On the other hand, all three missionaries mentioned above do other secular works to help local people in different ways, e.g., business of planting and breeding, loan offers to small business, financial support for students, summer camps, character education, tutor service, and so on. Some are common services similar with other religious and secular NGOs', some are their unique, innovative ideas based on their understanding of the area.

The relationship between missionaries and natives differs from that between legal clergies and natives. The legal temples and churches are centralized systems. The believers go to huge temples, churches, or other meeting points to attend religious meeting. The clergy are charismatic leaders with an aura higher than ordinary believers. Also, the shortage of clergy makes them overwhelmed with heavy workload, and they have little time and energy saved for establishing relationships with each believer. The coherence of the congregation depends on deacons, fellow workers and sub-groups in the church. On the contrary, the FBOs and missionaries deployed a decentralized system. They lived amidst the natives with close social distance. Their "sympathetic company" contributed to healing sorrow and trauma for disaster survivors. They also established relationships with natives through secular services and daily interactions though not all natives they dealt with really converted. The clergies of these groups organize religious meetings in their own house or a local believer's house, rather than in a large church or temple. In this setting, the clergy have better opportunity to know each believer well.

In the past, Christians in China have not hade much voice in the general public, especially the underground array of house churches. After the earthquake, the active participation of churches and believers, driven by their calling of social responsibility and ambition to evangelize, has increased the visibility of Christians in the broad Chinese society. It also activated integration and communication between churches in different regions (Sun 2012)[118]. However, ambition for evangelism is not always welcomed and appropriate after a disaster. Chester and Duncan (2010) mentioned that it already provoked ethics issues in the United States. Unfortunately, similar events also happened

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[118] The report can be accessed online: http://www.gospelherald.com/article/mcat/47761/four-years-of-sichuan-earthquake-disaster-relief-awakes-china-house-church-to-social-services.htm#.UeOmuiWSR2F

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in China. Right after the earthquake, a Christian FBO once organized a large number of mission teams to preach the Gospel in hospitals and affected villages. The missionaries cheerfully deemed the earthquake as a chance to preach Gospel, with no respect for the dignity and feeling of the survivors. A native of Sichuan posted an article on his blog, criticizing those mission teams as using the disaster as an opportunity to fulfill their own interest in evangelism[119]. I talked with Mary and Paul about it, and they confirmed it as true. They reflected about it and regarded the brutal missionaries as bad examples that violated Jesus' teaching.

The interaction between religion and disaster

After reviewing all kinds of religious organizations, I would elaborate more and single out some patterns of the interaction between religion and disaster. I look at these two mutually reciprocal mechanisms: *How does religion console people in suffering? And how does suffering influence one's religious faith?* And I examine both believers and non-believers. For such questions, it is not sufficient to use quantitative data to see the "rate" of population being or not being consoled by religion. Rather, it is the "logic," namely, how religion contributes to the consolation of suffering, that really matters. Seemingly contradictory logics might exist in different people.

(1)How does religion console people in suffering?

As reviewed above, religious narratives about the nature of disaster and death could help people cope with shock, loss, and bereavement. First, religious "theodicy," such as ideas of karma and God's plan, provides cognitive frameworks that rationalize the existence of disaster, and thus make it more reasonable and tolerable. The complexity and

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[119] The blogger is named *Meiyouyuanfang* (meaning: No distant place). The article can be accessed through this link: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5d226e3d0100bnka.html

variety of theodicy discourses I found in the field is beyond the scope of this essay. I will develop another chapter to talk about it. Second, religious discourses about spirits of the dead help the bereaved to soothe their worry and sadness about the loved ones who died. Many myths about the dead are often heard: "Their spirits went to Heaven." "They still existed somewhere." "The dead are Great Bodhisattvas." The former two suggest that the dead were not really "dead." The last one projects meaning and value upon the dead, that their death brings lessons or well-being to the living. Still another way to comfort the survivors is through the belief that God, or any other supernatural power, would protect them during or after the earthquake. As reviewed above, the Protestant believers in Hanwang meeting point prayed to God during the earthquake, and thanked God after their survival.

The effectiveness of these religious discourses and beliefs depends on the survivor's *believing in* them at certain degree. Pastor Luo of Beichuan church compares Christians with non-believers regarding their responses to the disaster:

> All Christians know, everything is God's good will. The Book of Job tells us that a man who fears God also encounters suffering. Suffering is a lesson God gives to us. After this lesson we could see that God gives us bigger blessings…Bible says there is suffering in the world, but in me (Christ) there is true peace…Many Christians were very firm and relied on God to walk through the whole thing. Some people with no religious belief could not endure suffering, and then did something that hurt themselves, such as suicide. Some could not endure [suffering] and had mental problems. Through suffering we see that humans are very weak. We are unable to conquer many things, and can only seek for God's guidance.

People with different beliefs in religion respond to disaster differently. A faithful believer could draw on a religious worldview about disaster, life, and death to make sense of the disaster, and find meaning in it. Contrarily, an absolute atheist does not believe in any religion, and thus would not be consoled by it. He may find comfort through other channels, such as psychology or philosophy. As for other people, who are neither atheists

nor believers yet, they could count on religious discourses "a little bit" without really converting. For instance, one can accept the idea of "spirit" that suggests the eternal existence of the dead, without becoming a Buddhist or Christian. To be comforted by religious ideas is one thing; to convert as a believer is another.

To introduce a religious idea or belief to non-believers, a missionary effort by clergy or ordinary believer is required. This will be discussed the in the next part.

(2)How does suffering influence one's religious faith?

It also involves various possibilities. Faithful believers tend to remain firm with their belief. They could use a religious worldview to interpret disaster, and also use disaster to enrich and strengthen their faith. Liu and Liu's survey (2009) found that the Buddhist survivors who remained in their faith after the earthquake tended to be those having good knowledge and practice in Buddhist doctrine. On the other hand, people with weak or unclear faith had diverse responses, depending on their understanding of religion and suffering. Some of them sought to strengthen their spirituality after the earthquake. One Protestant informant in Hanwang recalled that she almost lost her religious life once before. The earthquake awoke her, and she eagerly started to attend Bible study and other meetings. Another informant knew the Gospel but did not convert before the earthquake. He construed his survival as God's selection, and then converted as a Christian. On the contrary, believers who had wrong expectations about suffering, e.g., "There should be no suffering fallen on me, since I worship deity," might abandon their faith or convert to another religion after the earthquake[120].

As for non-believers, they could hear religious ideas brought by missionaries or FBO

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[120] This category is a statistic minority according to literature (Liu and Liu 2009) and interview data. However, two natives in Hanwang and Beichuan I interviewed belong to this category.

workers. There is no fixed pattern in the way disaster survivors accept or reject a religion. Interviews of Protestant agents discussed above present high diversity, depending on the survivor's personality, emotional need, and life situation, as well as the way the clergies or fellow workers approach and form relationships with them. First, most clergy and fellow workers observed that it was often useless to preach Gospel to non-believers in deep sorrow shortly after the earthquake. A proper timing of preaching tended to be when adequate trust between religious agents and natives has been formed, which took time and effort for the former. However, there were exceptional cases as well, who converted soon after the earthquake, because the fellow workers or the Gospel really comforted them. Second, the "logic" of the survivors' conversion also varies. Some survivors converted because the Gospel comforted them in sorrow and pain caused by the disaster. Some others did it because the Gospel could guide them to deal with life situations, not necessarily related to the disaster. Still others were touched by the care and company of clergy or fellow workers. Of course, there are people who rejected the Gospel. They might be atheist, or might not trust the missionaries. For instance, some natives felt that the missionaries offered help for the purpose of preaching. This teleological understanding made them unwilling to accept any religious message.

People	Religious attitude
Believers	Firm believers tended to remain firm in their religious belief.
	Weak believers might seek to strengthen their belief.
	Believers with wrong expectation about suffering might abandon their belief.
Non-believers	A survivor might accept certain religious belief because it soothed his sorrow caused by the disaster.
	A survivor might accept certain religious belief because he found it helpful or meaningful, either related to the disaster or not.
	A survivor might accept certain religious belief because he was touched by religious agents' care and company.
	A survivor might reject religious belief because he is an atheist, he is too busy, or he distrusts the religious agents.

Table1: Variation of religious attitude after the disaster.

I draw a chart to map out the variation of religious attitudes after the disaster, shown above. Although I present many cases and patterns of conversion, we should not overestimate the prevalence and depth of religious belief in the earthquake zones (a quantitative survey is still required to precisely assess the influence of religion). Many scholars, clergy, and even natives I interviewed admitted that a great portion of religious believers actually do not really learn and understand religious texts and philosophy very well. They merely pray for safety and welfare without further spiritual cultivation. Also, the influence of religion in real life is perhaps very limited. In summer 2012 I once visited an Islamic mosque in a disaster zone right after its Friday service. When the Muslims came out of the worship hall, I introduced myself and invited them to talk about experiences after the earthquake, especially whether and how religion helped them during the hard time. They (including the Akhund) answered: "Nothing to say!" and then started to complain about their unjust misery and unfairness of resource allocation, mostly against the local government. They spoke to each other loudly and paid little attention to me. This case indicates that religion is sometimes useless or irrelevant in solving practical concerns for the believers.

IV. Discussion

Following previous literature on religious revival (Bays 2003; Lee 2007; Yang 2005a; Yang 2008), I examine whether and in what sense there is any religious revival after the Sichuan earthquake. I look at three different kinds of religious organizations and sort out their similarity and differences.

The three types of religious organizations and agents discussed above have different historical backgrounds and goals. They interact with and establish relationships with local people in different fashions. They offer various kinds of support, including material and monetary aid, psychological care and consolation, moral cultivation and education, and religious teaching and preaching.

	Type A: Government-recognized local organizations	*Type B*: Faith-based organizations	*Type C*: Christian missionaries
Governmental recognition	+	+	−
Obedience to regulations on preaching	+	+ (public) − (private)	+ (public) − (private)
Relationship with local people	Centralized: Believers come to attend rituals or classes in the churches/temples.	Through services, including in-home visit, community activities, education programs.	Decentralized: Missionaries go to the rural area and live with local people.
Space of worship meeting	Huge, splendid churches/temples, and other legal meeting points.	FBOs basically do not host religious meeting for local people, due to regulation.	The missionary's or a native believer's house.

Table2: The nature and local relationship of three kinds of religious organizations/agents.

I use table 2 to compare the nature of these three types of organizations/agents. My research finds the variations of how different religious organizations/agents offer aids and establish relationships with local people:

(a) The local legal religious organizations offered material aids and emotional consolations in the early stage after the earthquake, with mild use of religious message. Many local churches/temples were damaged or even collapsed. The clergies and believers made huge endeavors to raise funds to rebuild the churches/temples even bigger and

more splendidly. In the later stage of reconstruction, ambitious clergies devoted more efforts in teaching religious and moral doctrines in legal sites.

(b) The FBOs offered physical aid and services, launched community activities, summer camps, and education programs, without publically preaching religious messages, due to governmental regulation. They generally obeyed the regulation to maintain a good relationship with the government, which is necessary for their survival and long-term stay in the disaster zones. However, individual staffers might still preach in private spheres when they think it is proper or needed to do so, to people who already trusted them.

(c) The Christian missionaries, either voluntary or sent by house churches, have strong ambitions to preach the Gospel in the disaster zones. Some of them went deeply into rural or mountainous areas, accompanying local survivors closely, living and working with them for a long time (could be more than five years). In this way they formed close relationships and trust with local people, and thus gradually made some to convert, and created small churches therein. Since their preaching is not "legal," they occasionally get into trouble with the authorities.

The relationship between natives and religious organizations/agents varies. The formal, legal churches and temples are centralized and hierarchical systems. The clergies have high charismatic aura. They need to serve a large congregation and have little time and energy for individual believers. Contrarily, the FBO workers and house church missionaries have much closer social distance with the natives, though most of them came from other provinces. They form a decentralized, loosely connected Christian community. The small-sized house churches allow more familiarity and intimacy between clergy and believers.

Concerning the question of religious revival, the influx of human and material resources, expressed in all three types of religious groups, is a sign of religious revival on the part of supply. The reconstruction of local religious sites is especially a prominent sign, since the local government, the academia, and the religious groups collaborate to project a grand plan to upgrade the local religious scene, especially in Beichuan County. However, the reception by local survivors is mixed and diverse. First, regarding how religion could console the survivors, interview data shows that religious discourse, such as meaning-making about disaster, life, and death contributed to psychological healing. Meanwhile, the religious agents could also use "sympathetic company" with little or no religious message to soothe the survivors' sorrow. It was sometimes more useful and proper. Second, regarding the change of people's religious attitude, local people who were already believers tended to remain firm or even strengthen their belief. Many non-believers also converted due to the service and mission works undertaken by clergies and FBO workers. But the overall population of church attendants underwent unstable fluctuation. For instance, the Three-self churches gained many new converts during the stage of relief work, but lost most of them afterwards. It probably implies that post-disaster missions could bring short-term increase of conversion, but the capacity of churches and clergies to maintain the long-term religious life of new converts are limited and uneven. On the other hand, the FBOs and house church missionaries significantly expanded the geographical territory of religious belief, though the number of converts was limited due to local entrance barriers against Christianity. A supplemental element of this religious revival is the emphasis on "moral cultivation" by almost all religious groups. Many Buddhist clergy and Protestant FBOs launched programs of moral teaching, such

as *guoxue* and character education. It shows that moral cultivation, even in a non-religious form, is an important concern of religious groups, which preexisted before, and outlasted the impact of disaster.

All findings of this chapter call for subsequent tracking, since religious revival is an ongoing process. It also calls for future research in many aspects. First, this chapter basically focuses on the part of "suppliers" of religious good, giving less voice to receivers, that is, the first-person perspectives of local people, in terms of how they interpret and evaluate the religious organizations. More fieldwork is required to find this piece of puzzle. Second, this research did not examine the difference between religious and secular organizations, in terms of the types and quality of service they offer. It only compares the sub-types of religious organizations. Third, the difference between the centralized and decentralized systems of religious organization invites us to rethink some features of religious life. We may ask: How do religious experiences vary by the arrangement of space and size of the religious meeting, and the relationships between clergy and congregation, and among individual believers? These are questions to be explored in the future.

Chapter Six
Meaning of Life and Death

Chapter Four deals with the way people make sense of this disaster by searching for its cause and purpose. Actually, it is not the only way people respond to suffering and death. Some quotations in Chapter Two and Chapter Four (echoing literature in psychology) express another dimension, that is, the meaning-making of life and death. For instance, some survivors recognize the fragility of life and then appreciate it more. Religious believers might conclude that life is in God's hand, and God would protect people in good faith. These discourses touch the existential questions about the core nature of human beings: What is life? What is death? What is the meaning of them?

Meaning-making about life and death seem to be topics for philosophers and psychologists. However, it also generates curiosity among students of sociology. As shown in this chapter, not all people understand or care about those existential issues in the same way. They have different ways of making their lives meaningful after the disaster. Hence, this research attempts to analyze such variations from the angle of sociology of knowledge: Who are concerned with the meaning of suffering, life and death? How do different people respond to these issues differently? What is the relationship between abstract, existential thinking and everyday life?

Literatures in sociology, psychology and anthropology all talk about trauma and meaning-making/seeking in different senses. Yet few studies sufficiently present the differentiation and variation of "meaning-making about life and death" in the social space. This chapter analyzes data from published texts and in-depth interviews, in order to fill this gap, and also explore the possibility of sociology in studying abstract discourses.

I. Literature review and research question

I introduce two groups of literature related to this chapter. The first group observes the tension and ambiguity inherent in the way human culture responds to death throughout history. Death renders the existence of the human individual and society meaningless. It nevertheless pushes human being to create something meaningful to overcome that nullity. The human being's struggle with death is thus a struggle between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. The second group is literature in sociology on the relationship between culture, social structure, and practice. It helps us to think about how to study existential questions from a sociological viewpoint.

(1) Tension and ambiguity in cultural responses to death

As reviewed in Chapter One, a tensive dialectic can be found between death and human culture: Death threatens the meaningfulness of the human world, while human world creates history and culture to overcome death (Bauman 1992; Berger 1967). Bauman makes a gloomy comment about it (1992:15):

> [D]eath blatantly defies the power of reason: reason's power is to be a guide to good choice, but death is not a matter of choice. Death is scandal, the ultimate humiliation of reason. It saps the trust in reason and the security that reason promises. It loudly declares reason's lie. It inspires fear that undermines and ultimately defeats reason's offer of confidence. Reason cannot exculpate itself of this ignomity. It can only try a cover-up. And it does. Since the discovery of death human societies have kept designing elaborate subterfuges, hoping that they would be allowed to forget about the scandal; failing that, hoping that they could afford not to think about it; failing that, they forbade speaking of it. According to Ernest Becker[121], 'all culture, all man's creative life-ways, are in some basic part of them a fabricated protest against natural reality, a denial of the truth of human condition, and an attempt to forget the pathetic creature that man is…Society itself is a codified hero system, which means that the society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of

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[121] Becker, Ernest. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press.

meaning.'

Bauman's comment depicts a rather gloomy picture. In the face of death, human culture and reason are "lie," "denial," and "myth" that try to hide the reality of death.

Contrastingly, the Existentialist writers, including Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Jaspers, conceded that death plays an important role in the human search for meaning. In *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger suggested that the *Angst* of "Being-toward-death" could be an impetus that makes the individual withdraw from the everyday immersion in the world of others, and search for an "authentic," individualized potentiality of his own being[122]. In the field of psychology, Frankl's existential analysis and logo-therapy (1959, 1967) insisted on the significance of "meaning" in human life, assuming that all individuals have a will to meaning, and freedom to activate that will. One could find meaning in creativity, experience, and change of attitude. Yet one also faces the "tragic triad" from time to time: unavoidable suffering, guilt, and death. Being a victim of Auschwitz, he sought for a positive attitude to face suffering and death:

> If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete. The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to a deeper meaning to his life (1959[2006]:67).

In this sense, suffering and death are not totally nullifying powers. One's awareness and anticipation of death could trigger one to reflect upon and fulfill the meaning of life. And this meaningfulness is not to be seen as "lie" or "myth" used for hiding the reality of death.

Scholars looking at history share a grand narrative about the change of human attitudes

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[122] See Cooper (1990) for further discussions on the Existentialist writers' thoughts about death.

toward death. In early times, the society resorted to religions and rituals which provided meaning for life and death. Contrarily, the disenchanted modern society has difficulty facing the reality of death, and tends to exclude it from public and ordinary life (Ariès 1974; Mellor 1993; Mellor and Shilling 1993; Walter 1991; Willmott 2000). In his canonical work on death and dying, Ariès (1974) summarizes Western society's attitudes toward death into four historical stages. The first is "tamed death" in the Middle Age. The dying person could foresee and prepare for his own death, which tended to be a public ceremony open to anyone. In this stage, people treated death calmly and quietly, as something familiar and close. The second is "one's own death." The moment of death was linked to the Judgment when one's life is to be weighed. Unlike the communal ceremony at the first stage, the dying person now was alone under God's observation and arbitration. In third stage is "thy death" rising in the eighteenth century. The scene of dying was exalted and dramatized with emotion, in which the bystanders showed grave suffering by crying, fainting, and languishing. The last stage is "forbidden death" in the modern era. People avoid and hide death away from daily life, which is supposed to be always happy. The process of dying, funerals, and burial are controlled by doctors, professionals, and commercial interests. These four historical stages summarized by Ariès contain a change in attitude toward death. In the first two stages, the dying person was in control of his own death. And there were sufficient cultural repertoires that offered meaning for death. In the last two stages, people gradually perceived death with fear and denial. They did not know how to face death with a peaceful attitude.

The literature reviewed above shows different aspects of cultural responses to death. I sort out few points. (i) There are at least two conceptualizations of death: The *specific*

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death and dying that happens to real persons at present or in the future; and the *general* reality of death, often represented as an abstract concept. The latter is the abstraction of the former, and seems to be distant from real life. Dealing with specific death and dying involves in many real practices, like hospitalization, funeral, and burial. Contrarily, dealing with general death is a symbolic activity. Bauman's discussion basically looks at how human culture responds to general death, while Ariès's work basically deals with both the specific and general dimensions of death. (ii) Bauman and existentialist writers reviewed above imply that people's awareness of mortality could influence the way they think about and act in their lives. For Bauman, the function of human culture is to deny and hide mortality. For existentialists, the individual and society struggle to find the meaning of life in the face of death. In this sense, meaning of life and meaning of death are two closely connected things. (iii) The individual's or the society's attitude toward death roughly fall into two types. The first one is to think and talk about death without fear, and generate meaningful narratives. The other one has difficulty facing the reality of death, and tends to sequestrate death from the public and daily life. Although the historical trend has been moving toward the second type of attitude, there might still be moments that (at least some) people are willing or even eager to think about the problem of life and death, as shown in the data below. In this sense, the scholarly narratives about the historical change of attitudes toward death, reviewed above, are not completely correct.

The diverse responses to death show the ambiguity of meaning considering the issue of life and death. However, this literature basically looks at the macro-level historical and social trends. It does not pay adequate attention to the life world of ordinary people. In

order to fill this gap, this chapter uses empirical data, namely, the voices of social agents from different social backgrounds, to further explore the diversity and ambiguity of meaning. My aim is to study the distribution of existential thoughts about life and death in the social space with a sociological approach.

(2) Knowledge, society, and practice: sociological approach

This chapter uses ethnographical data to study the way people think about existential questions when facing loss and suffering and the variation among different social positions and situations. I do not assume that all people undergo the process of meaning-making/searching in the same way. As we shall see, some people themselves actively articulated existential thoughts in the media; while other people, namely, the interviewees in the field research, also responded to those questions in various ways. The variation of their reactions could generate two sociological questions. First, what is the connection between social position/condition and consciousness? Second, what is the relationship between existential thinking and everyday life?

The first question is an old puzzle about the linkage between structure and mind. Sociologists already developed several theories and terminologies on this topic, including "ideology" (Marx, Mannheim), "hegemony" (Gramsci), "habitus" (Bourdieu), "power-knowledge" (Foucault) and so on. Their basic logic is that social positions or power relations generate corresponding consciousness, which in turn fulfills some sort of social function, such as inequality, domination, social reproduction and social exclusion. My research examines how people in different social positions (scholars, students, and survivors with different backgrounds) articulate or respond to existential questions. The data of my fieldwork suggests that social position could partially influence people's idea

about existential questions, in the form of "symbolic boundary" (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Yet there are other nonstructural factors as well, including religious belief, and the inner logic of existential questions; these factors indicate the "relative autonomy" of culture (Weber).

The second question is about the connection between existential thinking and everyday life. In recent decades, cultural sociologists have proposed several models to interpret the link between culture and action. Alexander's "strong program" (Alexander and Smith 2003) emphasizes the causal power of culture; Swidler (1986) adopts the metaphor of "repertoire" to study how culture could be used by social actors. Other scholars provide more complicated models. Sewell (1999) construes culture as a combination of a "system" of symbols and meanings; along with a sphere of "practice" shot through with willful actions, contradictions, and struggle. Vaisey's "duel model" (2009) differentiates the logic of "discursive-" and "practical-" consciousness. They generate post hoc justification and intuitive moral judgment respectively. Sewell's and Vaisey's models indicate dichotomous divisions in social life, i.e., system vs. practice, discursive vs. practical. However, as presented in this chapter, how these dichotomous realms interact with each other is a fairly complicated issue that cannot be explained by any single theoretical model.

My research echoes Swidler's *Talk of Love* (2001) that examines "how culture and experience are integrated – whether one illuminates and sometimes changes the other, or whether they remain segregated so that cultural lessons or programs for action resist by experience (p.53)." Similarly, I look at how people talk about life and death, and how people connect existential questions with daily practical issues. A few things are to be

noted: (i) Love is a popular topic that almost all people have some opinions about. Concepts like "commitment" or "freedom" are commonly shared cultural repertoires one can use to construct narratives about love. Contrarily, the meaning of life and death is an esoteric topic seldom appearing in daily talk, due to the modern trend of sequestration of death. The ways people construct narratives may be highly individualized. Some of them may seem idiosyncratic and do not belong to a clearly recognizable cultural repertoire. (ii) However, some people draw on existing philosophy or wisdom to explain the nature of life and death. As presented in this chapter, old Chinese sayings about fate and moral integrity, as well as the Christian idea about the timing of death, have been used by my interviewees in their imaginings about life and death. (iii) When analyzing interview data, I put the respondents' discourses about life and death in the context of their whole interviews, in order to see how and how much the existential thinking is integrated with real life and practices. The data shown in this chapter suggests that the connection between existential thinking and daily life is highly diverse and ambiguous. It further demonstrates the uncertainty of meaning.

In the following sections, I will present and compare discourses about life and death that emerged from different spheres. The sources of data include published works and in-depth interviews. The former is an active form of cultural production, in which the writers actively articulate what concerns them, and aim to spread massages to audiences (no matter who they are). Of course, the taste of the publishers and the whole cultural industry are background factors that influence the topics, forms, and contents of the published works. On the contrary, the data extracted from my own field research is an "involuntary" form of articulation. The researcher asks questions and then the

respondents make responses. All kinds of responses were recorded, and hence it allows more variation to be included.

II. Published discourses articulated by cultural elites

Existential problems about the meaning of life, and death are by no means a popular subject in both the public sphere and the mundane life of survivors. Hence it is a challenge to study it in a sociological perspective. Events of disaster and death provide a context that might generate discourses about existential questions (as reviewed above). And the researchers could analyze the social distribution and function of these discourses. The first place to find them is in publication. In this section, I present published discourses produced by cultural elites, such as scholars, writers, and journalists. They contemplated the problem of life and death, and attached symbolic meaning to human life. Most of them see the problem of life and death as an important or even urgent issue that calls for serious attention. Generally speaking, their narratives formulate the existential problem of life and death in several ways, including: (i) linking the problem of life and death to one's self-identity; (ii) linking it to real practice or pragmatic concerns; (iii) discussing it as pure knowledge. Now I use specific texts to demonstrate these types of meaning-making.

A group of professors of philosophy in Fudan University, Shanghai, held a symposium on May 27th, 2008. They reflected on the impact of the earthquake upon the society, touching the issue of morality, solidarity, and issues about life and death. They published the conversation as a volume *Life, Death, Love* (Dongfang 2008). Echoing the concern with meaning reviewed above, Prof. Deng suggested (pp.63-4):

When we demonstrate the truth of life, it definitely has an absurd dimension: We are finite and

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fragile. We pursue to conquer death, but it is unconquerable…We all pursue the meaning of existence, pursue to live richly. But eventually the unconquerable death destroys these all…In this absurd situation, why could we still lead a colorful life? Philosophy carries an important mission…to tell people how to live well, and consistently providing a hope of life.

So I think that in Chinese culture, "hope" is something about faith that can replace "religion." We often say, ordinary people…doesn't need a high-level, ultimate, scholarly basis. He could live just for a simple reason. For instance, there is an aged person at home, there is a child at home, and nobody take care of them. Such a very simple, naïve reason could give him a hope to live, no matter how humble and difficult it is, in others' eyes, to live in this way. But this hope could support his life and makes his life meaningful.

The scholars then discussed the significance of responsibility in giving people hope: different from Western culture which relies on an otherworldly faith in God, Chinese people have a strong secular "hope." For Chinese people, salvation lies not in God, but in the coherence and association of fellow people (pp.65-9). In this passage, the speaker contemplates the general reality of death, and then redirects the topic to the meaning of life. At first, he poses the meaning of life as an urgent issue that requires philosophers to provide answers. But then he indicates that ordinary people could gain hope in life simply through connections with, and responsibility for, others. Put the seeming self-contradiction of this narrative aside, and the speaker's argument is that the existential problem of life can be solved by social connection and pragmatic concerns, which overcome the nullifying power of death without appealing to any delicate, scholarly thoughts.

Another essay collection *Having Survived, We Must Strive* (Gao 2008) gathered short essays written by scholars and writers for helping the survivors to get through emotional hardship. Many of them touched the issue of life and death form different angles. For instance, Professor Lu in the Union Medical College quotes her earlier speech addressed

to a graduation ceremony, talking about life and death:

> Being an atheist, my viewpoint about death is different from religious believers. I don't have hope for eternal life. I only want to define death as one of the most decisive moments of life. I hope that I my self, and others, could at the largest degree manifest the dignity, stamina, and splendor of human being at this moment (death) which has always been regarded as the darkest moment of life (pp.126-7).

She then summarizes two tasks that could help people show splendor at a dark moment. The first is on the "relationship with oneself," to maintain one's image by means of good spirit, attitude, and behavior. The second is on the "relationship with others," to keep caring about other people, rather than looking exclusively at oneself. As an example of "relationship with oneself," she shared her own experience of serious illness that pushed her to think and talk about death.

> After I found that I probably got lung cancer, although I appreciate friend's consolation…but, I would rather directly confront life, illness, and death with friends. Facing death and thinking about death, this is a good chance. For most people, it is probably the only one [chance] through [their] entire life, and [they] shouldn't let it go easily. Hence, in this period, I've constantly talked with friends about death…I think that talking about death just like talking about life, without any taboo, is an expression of civilization. Anyway, on the relationship with oneself (mentioned above), I didn't let myself down (p.129).

Lu's philosophy is close to "tamed death" described by Ariès. She uses rich and meaningful reflections to overcome death. Facing her own illness, she talks about death openly, and sees death as a moment at which the dying person could show one's dignity. However, her narrative is not merely an abstract contemplation about death. Rather, it links death with self-identity and real-life practices. Her logic is: in order to show a splendor self at the moment of death, one should manage one's relationship with oneself, and that with others, well. It seems to be a life-time management of self that takes

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constant effort to accomplish[123]. In this sense, awareness of death (no matter how soon that death will come) might act as an emotional impulse, with causal power, influencing one's plans and actions in one's real life. And last, she comments that her willingness to face death candidly is an expression of "civilization." This term implicitly implies that her open attitude is superior, more progressive and enlightened than the opposite attitude that sequesters death with fear and taboo. This self-evaluation further enhances her self-image, making her feel good about herself.

Another case also sees life and death as a crucial issue that has certain effects on one's practice. Mr. Dong, a television program host engaged in a career of public welfare, introduces an old Chinese saying: "If one survives a huge catastrophe, one will certainly gain a good fortune afterward."[124] This saying is often quoted when somebody encounters a hazardous event. Dong uses it to encourage the earthquake survivors, especially young people, saying that the disaster could become a source of wealth for them. Similar to Professor Lu, he recalls his own experience of getting hepatitis (pp.115-7):

> The death rate of this disease is 85 percent, and it's almost incurable…At that time all joints throughout my body hurt severely. My body was pretty slow and weak when making a little movement, but my thoughts were extraordinarily swift. I thought much, even thought of giving life up. Later on, I changed my thoughts. Everybody has only one life. No one knows what is behind death. If one gives this life up, then what is the value of life? [I would] simply fight with Death…Since I recovered and left the hospital, I live more actively, and cherish life and time more than before. I wish I could live a single day as two or three days. Now I recall this, and the test of life and death has had positive and active [effect] on my later life. These [experiences] have made my later life, study, and work more efficient. The chance of success for me was enhanced significantly. Hence my living quality was advanced significantly.

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[123] In the beginning she talks about the maintenance of "relationship with oneself" when one is close to death. However, she then spends many paragraphs to recall her whole past life, indicating that the moment of death is taken as a summary of one's entire life.

[124] 大難不死，必有後福。

Of course, all this depends on reflection [upon life and death]…Between life and death, death is easy, and sometimes even very possible (*ouran*). For instance, when studying or driving, we encounter a huge earthquake, or sudden war or any other unforeseeable injury; we would probably die in a second. But, [if] you experience these and don't reflect upon the meaning of life, and even stop at fear of death and remain depressed, then you wouldn't have "good fortune afterward" no matter how much suffering you experience. Because "afterward good fortune" is actually - through the reflection [upon life] - the more passionate, more splendid life that glows from ever more respecting and cherishing life.

This narrative links the problem of life and death to real-life practice in another way. The concept of "good fortune afterward" can be seen as a particular version of theodicy, suggesting that suffering could bring benefit. Mr. Dong further uses his own experience to prove it. His reflection upon life and death during his illness influenced his attitude and practices after he recovered. It made him more active, ambitious, and successful. Whether or not this story is true is unverifiable in my research. But it is a typical story about suffering and life change which is familiar in most human societies (also echoing the model of "post-traumatic growth" mentioned in earlier chapters). The old saying about "good fortune afterward" is a condensed culture representation or repertoire that interprets the role of suffering in human life, and provides emotional comfort and energy to victims of catastrophic events.

Lu's and Dong's narratives propose the causal power of suffering (their own experiences of illness) and death in different ways. Lu projects a moment of death that functions as a summary of one's life, and then strives to maintain a good self before death. On the other hand, Dong adopts the popular idea of "good fortune afterward." He encourages the earthquake survivors to reflect upon the problem of life and death, which might bring them benefit in later life.

The discourses reviewed above generally see the meaning of life and death as an

important or urgent issue for human beings. In Deng's quote, humans need a meaning or hope to live vividly in the face of the nullifying power of death. Lu sees the moment of death as a summary of one's life and self. Dong emphasizes reflection upon life and death when one encounters suffering. Nevertheless, not all people share their concern with philosophical questions. Some people render them as unnecessary and even unwelcome. For instance, Mr. Yashi is a writer born in Guang'an, one of the earthquake sites. He works as a faculty member in a top university in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. Chengdu is 50 miles away from the epicenter of the 2008 earthquake. The earthquake shook Chengdu but did not cause severe damage and casualties there. Shortly after the earthquake, Yashi was concerned with the safety of his family in his hometown. He wrote down some passages about philosophical thinking, and different people's reaction around him. It is published in a collection of post-earthquake poetry (Huang 2011:40-42):

5.12

"Nature is unkind: it treats creation like sacrificial straw-dogs."[125] I have been long familiar with this saying. Sometime I proudly argued some "philosophy" based on it. Today, in few minutes, the once vivid world disappeared－The earth moved, the sky shook. Something in my heart also disappeared. Now, I take care of my aged mother. On the crowded playground of SWUFE[126], the saying occurred to me again. In the drizzle, I really wanted to shout at the starry sky: Damn you! Damn you "philosophy"!

5.13

The professors [staying] around started to smoke cigarettes of famous brand, and drink tea (Their eyes showed panic occasionally) [127], discussing the philosophical meaning and international influence of the natural disaster…They were once my very good friends.

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[125] It is an old Chinese saying: "天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗。" The author is Laozi, a philosopher in ancient time. The "sacrificial straw-dogs" is a kind of offering item used in religious ritual. The English version I quote here is a translation by Yutang Lin, a Chinese writer and linguist (1885~1976).
[126] Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, the school where Yashi works in. It seems that the school arranged people to evacuate from the buildings and stay on the playground after the earthquake.
[127] The texts in the parentheses in this quotation are original texts.

Suddenly, I began to dislike them, without a reason. I turned away and left them, coming to the blood donation station closest to the school, and donated 200 ml of blood. I waited in line for four hours. People in the line were mostly young people. Some of them even smiled and laughed (In the rain, a couple stood and kissed), and appeared unserious. I have to admit, today I really liked them more [than the professors].

The first passage talks about Yashi's attitude toward philosophical thinking. Being an intellectual, he once enjoyed it and had opinions on the old Chinese saying he quotes. The saying is a detached observation of a simple reality, that the Nature has its own rule (or temper) not in favor of living creatures. It gives birth to living creatures, and could kill them as well. People often quote this old wisdom when there is natural disaster or hazardous weather. However, Yashi's case is complicated. The live experience of the earthquake shocked him. Unlike the detached contemplation he used to do, now he personally encountered a life-threatening situation that breached the routine security of his life. Also, he worried about his wife and son living in the earthquake zone, though he got his son's message very soon. At this moment, his attitude changed sharply and found the old wisdom unwelcome, probably due to its detached, indifferent tone or its cruel truthfulness. The second passage shows the writer's attitude toward different people and activities. Some professors around him, who were his colleagues and friends, started to do philosophical thinking at ease (smoking and drinking tea are typical leisure-time activity of Sichuanese), just like he himself once enjoyed. Similar to his discomfort with philosophical thinking mentioned above, he felt bad about his colleagues. Instead of joining them, he went to do something *practical*, to donate blood for emergency use in the earthquake zones. At that time, he saw some young people who seemed to be in a relaxed mood without fear and anxiety. Actually, their attitudes were probably much less serious than the professors, since the latter's philosophical discussions were at least

"serious" to some degree. However, Yashi liked the young people more than the professors, because they were doing something practical and beneficial to people who suffered the disaster.

Yashi's reaction to philosophical thinking and his colleagues shows a "self-distancing" (I will further explain this concept in the next section). According to his note, it was probably triggered by the live experience of the earthquake, and his connection and concern with the earthquake zone. His discourse contrasts with other writers' reviewed above. Now I make a comparison between these diverse reactions to suffering.

Meaning-making about death: intellectual vs. practical orientations

The published texts produced by cultural elites, reviewed above, contain two orientations. The first is the intellectual orientation. It seeks for meaning of life and death and treats it as a crucial issue for human being. The second is the practical orientation, focusing on concrete goals and problems in the real world. They are analytically different, but in reality often mixed together.

The first three writers' discourses all have strong intellectual orientation. Deng searched for the meaning of life in the face of the nullifying power of death. Lu openly thought and talked about death when she was ill. Dong reflected on the meaning of life when he was ill. However, their discourses are yet linked to secular, practical aspects of life in certain ways. Deng observed that ordinary people could gain hope from responsibility for collectivity (ex. family) rather than from abstract discourse or otherworldly belief. Lu's contemplation on death called for cultivation of self and caring for others. Dong gained growth in ambition and success in his life after illness. Both their eager impulse to contemplate existential questions, and their attention to practical goals,

echo existentialist writers' thesis that one finds meaning, as well as alternative ways of living, from awareness of mortality. They contrast with Bauman's thesis that humans developed culture to deny and hide the reality of death. (They also echo the type of "association with meaning and order" presented in the next section.)

Yashi's discourse is quite different. His emotional reaction to philosophical thinking and his colleagues shows the incapability of talking about suffering and death in modern time. Although he was used to talking about suffering from an intellectual viewpoint, the earthquake changed his attitude. In that situation, he gave priority to practical actions over philosophical thinking. This position differs from the other writers mentioned above. Although Deng, Lu, and Dong all recognize the value of practical goals, their discourses are motivated by existential impulses, and dominated by philosophical thinking. It implies that existential thoughts could have *causal* power in practices and actions.

It is difficult to explain what causes the contrast between Yashi and other writers. It can be a personal difference, or the nature of suffering they encountered (illness vs. disaster), or the timing of their writing (shortly or long after the suffering). But they altogether present a universe of possible responses to suffering and death; that is, the various ways of meaning-making, and rejection of meaning-making, about life and death.

These intellectual discourses emerged from academia, cultural circles, and the publication industry, and are distributed via elite-based media (journals, books, online databases and bookstores). They are attempts to provide or reproduce a system of meaning, in the face of disaster and suffering. They are potential resources that can be used by local survivors to face their own suffering. However, they do not represent the voices of the majority of the survivors, nor are they widely distributed and read in the

earthquake sites. Hence they are under-circulated, unused or wasted resources, only available to a limited population of educated readers.

In the next section, I will turn to in-depth interviews I conducted in the fieldwork, dealing with local survivors with different social backgrounds. Their responses contain more variety than published works.

III. Fieldwork in Hanwang and Beichuan

The survivors of the damaged towns, Hanwang and Beichuan, face brutal economic hardship. They lost houses and properties in the old towns, and have to pay loan debt for the new houses. Given declining economic condition and rising prices (of food and commodities), it is hard to find a job or run a business in town, and those who have a job or business can hardly earn enough money to re-accumulate wealth. A significant portion of females do not go to work because they need to take care of young children. It makes their financial burden even harder. Those who have better resources or ability probably moved out to work and live in other cities (such as Mianzhu, Deyang, Chengdu, and even outside Sichuan).

Under these material conditions, their "meaning-making" about their lives is modest. Most interviewees of middle age and older do not have a strong ambition about the future; they only wish to get through the economic hardship, and let their children study well in the school. Some residents criticize the incompetence of the government and express several opinions about how to improve the town's economic and cultural life. In Chapter Three, I already demonstrated the constraints, resources, and agency of the survivors living in the new towns. In this chapter, I specifically examine their meaning-making

about life and death.

The logic of interview data is different from published works as discussed above. Published works are deliberately organized and produced. The contents are more or less voluntary articulation, no matter if it is authentic or not. A writer only writes what is in his mind, and passes what is absent from his mind. On the other hand, in an interview, the researcher asks questions first and waits for the interviewee's answer. And the researcher asks the same questions to all interviewees, no matter whether or how they thought about the questions before. Hence an interview is able to extract more variety and complexity from the sample population.

As listed in Appendix 2, the interview schedule of this research is designed as a linear narrative. The existential questions come at the end of the narrative, to ensure that the conversation is embedded in the context of disaster, rather than pure abstract contemplation. The interviewees' responses vary significantly, and it is difficult to single out merely one or two variables that could explain the variation perfectly.

Findings: Meaning of life and death

The interview data generates more variation in responses than the published texts do. I asked the interviewees: "Have you thought of questions about life and death? What is death and what is the meaning and purpose of life?" Although these questions might be strange or unfamiliar to many survivors, their responses still reveal useful messages that indicate their social distance from this kind of question. Also, the flow of the interviews was open, allowing the respondents to talk about anything they were concerned with, not necessarily about the disaster itself. In my analysis, it is not only the *content* but also the *way* people react to the questions, that is the subject matter of my research. I sort the

interviewees' responses into four categories: (1) *Unawareness*: One could not understand the questions, however might have something to say about life and death in other ways; (2) *Self-distancing*: Either due to symbolic boundary or existential fear, one distances oneself from the questions, and does not want to think and talk about them. (3) *Association with meaning and order*: One thinks about the questions with either intellectual or practical orientation, attempting to establish meaning and order for life and death. (4) *Suspension of meaning or control*: One does not seek for meaning about, or control over life and death.

The interviewees' answers to these questions are not treated as isolated discourses floating in a vacuum. I examine the connection between these answers and other parts of the interviews, to figure out the relation between one's existential thinking and his whole social life. For some interviewees, there are interesting contrasts between the two realms.

(1) Unawareness

A few people seemed to be unfamiliar with questions about life and death. They did not understand them and kept talking about totally different things. However, it does not mean that they know nothing about life and death. An interviewee, Fiona, (H09, Female, 40s, Junior high school) who did not understand my questions once saved another woman from suicidal action. She recalled that scene:

> There was an old woman. She kneeled down in the house, knocking her head on a brick, saying: "Oh God, why are you blind? You force me to die. I have been alone, and you shook down the house. How can I live in the future?" I was calm at that moment. I called her: "Liu, was there anybody in your house?" She said no. I said it is good that nobody was in the house [when the earthquake occurred]. Why are you crying? You see, all houses collapsed, not only yours…If there was somebody [in the debris], we can help you to rescue him/her. Don't cry anymore. She calmed down in a second, and stopped crying, and disappeared soon…I said it was lucky that I saved your life. But I was kind of silly at that time and don't know what to do.

People went to search children, yet I didn't know what to do. When I moved my feet, I couldn't walk.

This story shows that simple logical thinking could save others from the will to die, without any grand, abstract philosophical thinking. Actually, Fiona's persuasion of the old woman was almost an immediate intuition, since she herself was shocked by the quake and did not know what to do, and even could not walk.

(2) Self-distancing

Some interviewees admitted their social or psychological distance from questions about life and death. I summarize two different kinds of self-distancing. The first is "categorical distancing:" One renders himself as a kind of person that is not equipped for, or interested in, questions about life and death. The basis of such distancing tends to be a certain kind of social category, status, education, or personality. The second type of distancing is "existential distancing:" One feels uncomfortable or unworthy to think about questions about life and death, regardless of what kind of person he is. I present the findings of the two kinds of distancing as below.

Categorical distancing

Plenty of researches have been dedicated to social distinction and boundary making, the mechanisms by which social actors differentiate and associate with each other. They further fulfill many fundamental social processes, such as the acquisition of status, distribution of resources, social stratification and inequality (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bryson 1996; Gieryn 1999; Lamont 1992; Sahlins 1991; Tilly 1998). In their review article on this topic, Lamont and Molnar (2002) differentiate two kinds of boundary. The first is symbolic boundaries, which are "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space." The other

is social boundaries, the "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (pp.168-9)." The act of boundary making can be based on any trait or object we can imagine: gender, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural taste, education, and so on. A widely agreed symbolic boundary might become a social boundary, having objective effect on social interaction and resource distribution.

The categorical distancing discussed here is a kind of symbolic boundary that distances one from existential thinking about life and death because one feels that he does not belong to the type of person who would do that thinking. Unlike boundaries based on gender, class, or education, the distancing from existential thinking is probably unable to generate a social boundary, because existential thinking is not a widely shared practice that occurs frequently in daily life, and hence does not have the power of significantly influencing social interaction and resource distribution.

People who distance themselves in this way tend to be less educated (elementary school or below). It does not mean that they do not pursue anything meaningful at all. In response to my questions about life and death, a shuttle bus driver, Ben (H11, M, 30s, elementary school unfinished)[128] said: "Probably only those rich people who have higher goals think about [these questions], we do not…" Meanwhile, he has been working for a NGO dedicated to social support for residents in Hanwang.

Daniel, the music band leader mentioned in Chapter Three (H16, M, 66, elementary school) said: "I have not been elevated to that level. A human is [killed by disaster] in one moment, humans are like that. Life is fragile in itself." Contrastingly, he could clearly explain his ambition and goal for his band, which is to revive Hanwang's cultural

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[128] The format of the interviewee's personal information is (code number, sex, age, education level, occupation).

life.

Similarly, Irene, the businesswoman mentioned in Chapter Three (H35, F, 56, elementary school) has been enthusiastic in public affairs and economic recovery of Hanwang Town, although she is only an ordinary citizen rather than a governmental official. Considering the questions about life and death, she said:

> Probably those who are not so extroverted think about these questions day and night. And those who have much leisure time think about them…After all, what I am thinking is how to survive, how to do business well, how to maintain the lives of the family. As for your questions, sometimes I think about them, and feel that life is meaningless, and the earthquake almost killed me. I occasionally think about these, but just for a moment, and did not deeply think about them. To be honest, our life styles and *wenhua* (education)[129] level are different; hence many thoughts are different. You want me to clearly express something, yet I couldn't.

Among these three interviewees, Ben distances himself in the sense of social status or class. He thinks that the only "rich" people care about the questions. Daniel uses a more abstract way of distancing, saying he is not yet "elevated" to be able to answer the questions. However, he still said something about life and death, saying that life is fragile. Irene's speech reveals much information about the mechanism of distancing. She mentions many social categories: personality (introverted), status (about leisure time), education, and life style. She has a clear idea that the questions about life and death do not belong to people like her. However, she said she sometimes thought of them and felt life meaningless. This occasional feeling is close to the type of "suspension of meaning or control" discussed below.

The interviewees who distanced themselves from existential questions might still have ambitious goals in real life. In other parts of the interviews, we could find their major

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[129] In Chinese language, "*wenhua*" literally means "culture." However, in daily usage, it often means education level.

concerns, sometimes vivid ambitions. For instance, when Daniel explained the goal of this music band, he said: "There is a regression in economy, and we shall not have a regression in thoughts and spirit. You must stand firm by yourself. Do not be passive due to the earthquake…do not let others look down upon you." He aimed to enrich the cultural life of the town, to earn wide visibility for the town (He and his band were once broadcast on television), and to encourage the town citizens' "thoughts and spirit" in the face of economic difficulty. On the other hand, Irene cares about more practical issues, that is, to "survive." She runs several businesses in New Hanwang in order to create job opportunities and attract consumption in Hanwang. She even wishes to become a famous person through her dedication (though the reality is pretty difficult).

As mentioned above, categorical-distancing is a conceptual imagination, or a stereotype, about different natures of oneself and others. It has linkage with the objective social classification (class, status, etc), but it is closer to self identity and symbolic boundary, which are the subjective dimensions of social distinction.

Existential distancing

The second type of distancing is not based on the individual's self recognition of his own social position or category. Rather, it is based on one's own evaluation or feeling (emotional reactions) about the existential questions. I quote three responses:

——Loren (H20, M, 37, junior high school, factory worker): I didn't think of this question…[After the earthquake] School children's bodies were put on ping-pong tables. You just want to cry, you never think of why there is life and why there is death. [You] just want to do something for them, don't let more people be like them…At that moment, I thought this way. After a period of time, you still don't think about life and death. You only think about how to live…Because my family didn't not have casualty, our grief was not comparable to others'. What we thought about is realistic problems.

——Alice (H30, F, 33, college, white collar worker in DTC): I didn't think about life and death

very much. Those spiritual, empty things, I feel afraid when I think about them. If you think about life and death, oh, you carry many burdens on your shoulder, how could you put them down? And you feel worse when you think about them more. I don't want to think about these problems. I tell myself, just finish today's work, you couldn't manage tomorrow.

──Dorothy (B20, F, 21, College student): I would never think about these questions, because I felt painful whenever I thought of them. Sometimes I got kind of passive, and then thought, what if one day my father and mother are gone, my grandpa and grandma are gone? And I felt afraid so much. I'm afraid of thinking about these things, and don't want to think about them…Sometimes when something happens, for example, quarrels between friends. Then I would think about many things, and then feel very bad and painful, and then don't want to think about them.

Loren was once a business man, and then factory worker. After the earthquake, he joined the rescue and relief work, and saw many dead people's bodies. He directly confronted real, specific death, and did not want to think about it in an abstract, philosophical way. Rather, he focused on more practical issues, to "do something for them." But actually he did not have a chance to really do something for others, and could only struggle for his family's survival.

Alice is already mentioned in Chapter Three. She is a well-educated white collar worker in DTC[130] who lost her husband in the earthquake. After the earthquake, she dedicated herself to work in order to get through the pain. She also took more responsibility in family affairs than before. At leisure time, she liked to read. She wished to learn new knowledge from books in different areas, to strengthen herself for the future. Her interest covers many kinds of books, from professional knowledge (for work) to pure literature. However, even good reading habits could not guarantee one's willingness to reflect upon questions about life and death. In the interview, she mentioned that she is

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[130] Please refer to Chapter Three. DTC is Dongfang Turbine Corporation located in Hanwang before the earthquake.

"afraid" of those "empty" questions. She saw these questions as "burden" that cannot be put down. Echoing literatures reviewed earlier, this sentiment is an existential fear that sequestrates death from one's mind. She distanced herself from existential questions not because she does not care about them (like other people quoted above), but because she sensed something in those issues and felt uncomfortable.

Also mentioned in Chapter Three, Dorothy was a high school student when the earthquake occurred. Instead of thinking about death as a general concept, she imagined the possibility of losing family members. Paradoxically, she herself tended to have this imagination when something went wrong in real life. And then she felt troubled about it and did not want to think about it anymore. It indicates that individuals sometimes do think about things that make them feel uncomfortable, i.e., the possibility of losing significant others or objects. It (along with other similar cases) further implies that the sequestration of death reviewed above does not mean that one does not think about death at all. Rather, one feels and senses something, and then avoids it.

Existential distancing is not based on social position, but the logic of the existential questions. It echoes the modern trend of sequestration of death reviewed earlier, and the case of Yashi discussed in the last section. However, the three respondents' opinions under this category still differ with each other. Loren simply did not think of existential questions at all, and turned to practical problems instead. Alice felt an unendurable emptiness inherent in the questions, and did not want to think about them further. Dorothy imagined the possibility of losing her family, rather than the abstract concept of death.

(3) Association with meaning and order

Unlike the previous two types of responses, this type projects certain meaning or order upon life and death, with either intellectual or practical orientation.

Joyce (H28, F, 38, vocational college) and her husband have been managerial staffers in DTC for many years. They are well-educated and have fairly good income (compared with other respondents living in Hanwang). They have a daughter, who was 10 years old at the time of interview. In response to my question about life and death, she shared her reflection upon her own life, and focused on the value of family:

> Now I care about family more than before the earthquake. In the past, I lived under my parents' protection without experiencing any disaster. I study and go to work with little difficulty, without understanding the pressure of life. Now I see other people losing their families, and then I feel that life is very precious. I think that the most blissful thing is: [my] parents live long, couples get along well, and the child behaves more politely. Other things are not so important…
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> [Before the earthquake] I probably didn't see family love, life, and death as important. I didn't think about these very much. After the earthquake, I saw many women in their forties who lost their children. They had such a desperate longing, and took much effort trying to have a new child…I was once very careless on child rearing, unlike some other mothers who are very careful. They worry about children's safety and eating, and take care of them well. Seeing other people losing their children, I had a deep feeling, and inevitably care about my child more [then before].

In this narrative, Joyce thought about life and death not in an abstract, general sense. She witnessed the actual death of others (especially children) and then reflected upon her own life. She realized that her past life, which had been safe and well, should not be taken for granted. Life is fragile and hence precious. And then she focused specifically on the issue of child rearing. She saw other parents' great care of children, the loss of children in the earthquake, and many parents' desperate longing for a new child. These altogether made Joyce change her careless attitude. She engaged herself more, and became more careful

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in child rearing.

Some other interviewees link the nature of life and death with moral imperatives or wishes to do something, which made life meaningful. I quote two passages here:

——Shaun (H10, M, 66, high school education, retired teacher): Death is objective. Even a little grass will wither sometime. A human will definitely pass away when time comes. "Since time began, to die who can decline? O Through history books in glory, let our crimson hearts shine!"[131]

——Lily and Sam (H12, A couple in their 40s and 50s): Cherish the life. Enjoy whatever you deserve. Life is the most important thing. Human life is not worth money. When one dies, he has not spent his money. Since one survives, one should lead a meaningful life. So I wish to live long and do something before I die. Don't be too selfish and eccentric; be reciprocal with others.

Shaun is a retired school teacher and businessman mentioned in Chapter Three. His response starts with a detached knowledge about the necessity of death: All lives shall pass away sometime. Then he quoted an old Chinese saying, a famous verse from Wen Tianxiang's poem. Wen was a governmental official in the Song Dynasty around the twelfth century. He once organized an army to defend against Mongolian invaders. After the regime was defeated, Wen refused to surrender and serve the new rulers. He accepted capital punishment with no fear. The verse means that all people shall die, but it is meaningful to die for moral integrity, which is more important than wealth and power. Shaun quoted this verse to indicate a way to make life and death meaningful. However, it seems to be an abstract ideal distant from his ordinary life (described in Chapter Three). In the rest of his interview, some messages about the way he did business and chose the career might be related to this. When he recalled the years he did business, he emphasized that he was honest and did not cheat. Also, he was generous to people who

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[131] 人生自古誰無死,留取丹心照汗青。

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dealt with him. Many people owed him money due to difficulties, yet he did not push them to repay him (Ironically, his wife Tina said he was too honest and lost much money). The last thing is his low ambition in status promotion. He said that at several times he had a chance to get into the circle of the authorities; but he did not have the interest in that, and thus let the chances go. He said it is a kind of "failure" (as a self-mockery). These narratives altogether depict his value that prefers morality over wealth and power.

The second quote came from a couple who worked in a division of Tianchi corporation, a once important mining enterprise in Hanwang. Their opinions contain two messages. The first is to cherish and enjoy life before one dies. It is a typical post-disaster response. Before the earthquake, many people worked hard, saved money, and did not consume very much. Some of them died in the earthquake without sufficiently enjoying life. After the earthquake, although people were poorer than before, they would like to spend money more than before[132]. The second massage is to make life meaningful. One way to do it is to do something for others, e.g., give some money to beggars on the street, or donate some money in Buddhist temples. They told me a story that they once planned to sponsor one of their daughter's classmates because her family broke down and could not support her (but she did not accept it and chose to find a part-time job). These two messages that suggest enjoying life and conducting altruistic actions complement each other. They depict possible ways of living a meaningful life.

The last example is Bill (M, 66, junior high school), introduced in Chapter Three. According to his narrative, he underwent many difficult life events since his early years, including the Cultural Revolution, the bankruptcy of his work unit, his daughter's illness,

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[132] It is a popular discourse often heard from the survivors. However, its validity requires further verification.

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and the 2008 earthquake. But he kept a calm attitude toward those sufferings. Although

his education level only reached junior high school, he had a good reading habit, and was

especially interested in history. His reflection on life and death combines intellectual and

practical orientations with high coherence. He introduced the concept of fate to explain

the nature of life. In Chinese language, "fate" is expressed by two words "*ming-yun*."

They have different connotations. The former refers to a fixed predestination; the latter is

something that can be created or changed by humans. Bill applied this concept to discuss

the way to maintain one's fitness and prolong one's life. He said:

> I think it's what Daoism says: "My fate depends on me, not the Heaven." If [you] depend on
> the Heaven, it's impossible. One holds one's own fate. Don't complain the Heaven and other
> people, don't resent anything. One strengthens exercise by oneself. I do well while living, and
> be peaceful when I die, that's it. Try your best not to regret anything in this life, that's it.
> Come peacefully, go peacefully. It is life.
>
> Life and death aren't determined by human; it's natural law. You only hold control on your
> own life process. It's still your own problem. It involves in the way of keeping fit. As for the
> problem of fate (*ming-yun*), I think it's not very important. There is no such *ming-yun*. It is
> yourself. *Ming* is a fixed circle, *yun* goes on its own, not necessarily follows the circle.
> Coming from where, going to where. You can enlarge it (the circle) without a limit. At the end
> you still come back, or lessen this circle. But eventually it's the point, circle[133]. The circle
> could be very small, but you can enlarge your own *yun*, prolonging your life cycle.
>
> …You must have good habits and customs, and good attitudes. These are the most important.
> To prolong life, the genes and heredity are not your business. What you can do is attitudes,
> habits, and exercise. Having done these, try not to get sick, not to do dangerous things as well
> as possible. Be careful in daily life. Don't do dangerous things. Habits. When it's time to get
> up, [you] don't get up, [you] drinks and smokes, fool around…these are important.

In this narrative, Bill explained the concept of *ming-yun*. *Ming* is the fixed course of life

and death, and the natural composition of heredity; while *yun* is the individual's action

and effort that creates one's own fate. He especially emphasizes the latter. Through good

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[133] He means that life starts with a point and ends at the same point.

habits, attitudes, and exercise, one could remain fit and live long, that is, to enlarge the "circle" in his metaphor. At the end of the passage, he also listed behaviors harmful to one's life, such as smoking, drinking, and bad life style, as negative examples. This philosophy is coherent with his attitude about how to get along with the damage and loss caused by the disaster, that is, to understand the problem, to overcome the difficulty, to adapt to the environment, and adjust one's mind by oneself.

The four cases presented above associate certain kind of meaning or control with the issue of life and death. Their responses also indicated what they care about and what they believe. Joyce saw many children's deaths and then started to engage herself more in child rearing. Shaun and Lily proposed possible ways one could make life meaningful, including moral value, enjoyment, and altruism. Bill emphasized the importance of human agency, by which one can pursue physical fitness and long life. Both intellectual and practical orientations can be found in their discourses. Shaun quoted an old saying about moral integrity to depict an ideal way of living, while Bill adopted the concept of *ming-yun* to explain the nature of fate. These are intellectual attempts to use existing cultural repertoire to make sense of life. Meanwhile, most of them also put an eye on practical issues, like family, lifestyle, and health. It further proves that existential questions about life and death are not pure, abstract contemplation floating in the air. Rather, they are connected to practice and agency in many different ways.

(4) Suspension of meaning or control

Contrasting with the last category that projects meaning and order upon life, this type of response suspends the meaning of life or control over life. The cases presented under this type are already mentioned in earlier chapters.

Meaninglessness

Some people express a passive view, seeing life as meaningless. It is a typical post-traumatic reaction. However, the sense of meaninglessness is a general, abstract feeling. Even if one feels this way, one might still find something in real life meaningful. For instance, a dancing organizer in New Hanwang mentioned in Chapter Three, Diane (H13, F, 43, elementary school), said:

> Before the earthquake, it was so relaxed. After the earthquake, I feel it is unimportant to do anything. Human is so fragile, even than an ant. I feel human is meaningless. I did several businesses before. I once sold clothes, fixed vehicles, and ran a store…[Now] they call me to do business, yet I have no mood, no confidence. I feel meaningless and don't want to bother.

In this quote, Diane recalled that she did several kinds of business before the earthquake. But after the earthquake she lost the energy and confidence for resuming any business. Interestingly, she devoted great passion to organizing the daily group dancing every evening from late 2010 to Fall 2012. She then opened a dancing classroom, in which her niece Nina was the teacher. A possible reason for this discrepancy is Diane's attitudes toward different kinds of activity. Her sense of meaninglessness was a feeling about life in general, which was disrupted by the earthquake. However, doing business and hosting dancing are two different kinds of activity, and the disaster affected the nature and meaning of them differently. The former is a task of survival and profit-making. The businessmen carry the burden of management, calculation, success and failure. It was especially stressful and uncertain due to the economic hardship of the damaged town. Contrarily, the latter is a recreational and aesthetic activity. Its aim was to create emotional energy in the town citizens, to offer a moment of relaxation and consolation for people who suffer from traumatic memory and uncertainty about the future. It does not seek for profit and has little to lose (Diane required the participants to pay five RMB

per month for maintenance of equipment. Yet it was almost voluntary rather than mandatory). Perhaps Diane found meaningfulness in such a vivid cultural/communal practice.

This logic does not apply to all people, definitely. Remember Irene, the businesswoman who opened a handful of businesses in New Hanwang (with constant financial struggle, though). She generally distanced herself from the existential question about life and death; yet she occasionally felt that life is meaningless. Differently from Diane, she kept doing business, and was even more ambitious than before the earthquake. In her rather pragmatic philosophy, doing business was necessary for her family's survival and also beneficial for the town's economy. She scarcely engaged in recreational activities, like dancing and Mahjong, and was always busy in her business. Compared with Diane, she held a much stronger spirit of entrepreneurship, and apparently rendered it as the most meaningful thing in her life.

The contrast between Diane and Irene shows the wide diversity of human responses to disaster. Both of them did business before the earthquake. However, after the earthquake, one of them had no energy to do business anymore, and resorted to cultural/communal practices; while the other one became more ambitious than ever to initiate business for improving the economy of the town. They both felt "life is meaningless," yet they found different activities as meaningful and dedicated themselves to them.

Surrender to fate

Some people emphasize the reality that humans could not control or resist the coming of death. It is close to the concept of fate. Different from Bill, who emphasized the power of human agency, this type of respondent does not pursue a long life, but would rather

accept what happens to them. The two cases presented here are Nancy and Sherry, who are already mentioned in Chapter Two, under the category of "acceptive discourse," that they would not resist death or struggle for survival when a deadly moment (disaster or any hazardous event) comes.

Nancy (H14, F, 60s, low education) and her husband were both retired and led a peaceful life in New Hanwang when I interviewed them. Although she complained about losing more than she got in the process of resettlement, she basically felt content with the current situation. When I asked Nancy about the meaning of life and death, she recalled the first few days after the earthquake when her family once wanted to search for surviving relatives:

> In the first day, [we stayed in] tents. My daughter-in-law's father was killed (by the earthquake). She said: "Don't go to find my father. If he is alive, he would come to find us. If you go outside and get killed (by collapsing buildings) it's not worthy to exchange three lives for one life." Then we cried in the tent and didn't go out. In the second day, my son came back from Xichang[134], and sent us to Xichang. Ten days later we returned here…[I'm] old, and can't take care of others. [I] can only take care of myself and that's it.
>
> (Me: Have you ever thought of the meaning of life and death?)
>
> I don't think of this. One dies when one should die. One lives when one should live. Someday if I am killed [by disaster], so be it. You could not avoid even you want to avoid [when it is time], you could not die even you want to die [when it is not the time]. No matter how worried you are, things will happen. It's meaningless to think about them.

In this passage, Nancy shared an experience of being incapable to search and rescue a family member. She and her husband intended to find her daughter-in-law's father, but were dissuaded for the sake of their own safety. Then their son came to take them to Xichang, where they would be much safer. These events showed that they could only take care of themselves, and had no capability to save others. After this story, she

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[134] Xichang is a city in southwest Sichuan, where her son lived and worked.

expressed her opinion about the irresistibility of fate, although she did not use this word exactly. This view about life and death nullifies the power of human agency, and plainly accepts whatever happens to the individual. It surrenders the control over life to the course of fate itself, and it is unnecessary to think or worry about it, because there is nothing one can do to resist the course of fate.

The second case is Sherry (H15, F, 17, vocational high school). She used to live near Old Hanwang. After the earthquake, she happened to know and establish a good relationship with a Christian-based NGO. Since the last year of her study in a vocational high school, she has worked out of town to earn money. When I interviewed her in 2012, she got a job in a restaurant in Chengdu City. About the question of life and death, she said:

> As for death, Christians say it is fixed. If you are doomed to die, you couldn't change it. My friend said, some people don't die even after many car accidents. Some people die for one [accident]. Maybe, when time comes, let it happen naturally. I don't deliberately rebel against my life. Some people want to kill themselves, with an extreme mood. Don't be so. When time comes up, it comes up. Otherwise it doesn't come anyway.

Similar to Nancy, this view expresses an acceptive attitude toward fate. However, it does not mean that she does not pursue anything at all. The earthquake brought her many chances to know outsiders and learn new things from them. This experience opened her eyes and inspired her to explore opportunities of living and working in different places, especially big cities.

III. Discussion

This chapter studies how people reflect upon the meaning of life and death after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. The sources of data include published works produced by

cultural elites, and in-depth interviews with local survivors. The data shows that people's attitudes toward death contain a large diversity. It does not fit the scholarly narratives about the historical progress toward sequestration of death, which is only partly true. It does not confirm Bauman's thesis that human developed culture as a denial or myth to hide death.

The published texts produced by cultural elites strongly express the existential impulse of meaning-searching. The awareness of death motivated Prof. Deng, Lu, and Mr. Dong to contemplate the meaning of life from different angles (the latter two themselves experienced deadly illness). However, their existential impulses directed them to practical concerns as well. Deng construed that responsibility could be a source of meaning for ordinary people. Lu was open to talk about death without fear, and developed a way to cultivate oneself and make death the most dignified moment of one's life. Dong's experience of illness brought him a more active attitude and a more successful life afterward. Another writer, Yashi's, thoughts underwent a huge change. He once enjoyed philosophical thinking; but after the earthquake he felt uncomfortable about it, and preferred practical actions helpful to the survivors. In published writings, discourses in favor of meaning-searching and philosophical thinking are statistically more prevailing than discourses that dislike them[135]. Yashi's work is a special case that contrasts with most intellectuals' works.

The questions about life and death generate more variation in the local survivors. Out of interview data, I sort out four types of responses: (1) unawareness, (2) self-distancing, (3) association with meaning and order, and (4) suspension of meaning or control.

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[135] There are many publications that discuss cultural, moral, and existential topics after the 2008 earthquake (cited in Chapter One). But Yashi's writing is at present the only one I found, produced by cultural elite and published openly, that expresses an anti-philosophy sentiment.

The type of "unawareness" refers to people who did not understand my questions. However, the respondents' messages are still valuable. The case presented in this category, Fiona, saved an old woman who tried to kill herself after the earthquake. It showed her intuitive wisdom about problems of life and earth.

The type of "self-distancing" has two sub-types. "Categorical distancing" is a sentiment that one feels one does not belong to the type of people who might be interested in existential thinking. It involves self identity and symbolic boundary based on certain social classifications (by status, education, life style, etc). This sentiment is yet under-recognized by literature on death and dying and literature on boundary making. Meanwhile, the sub-type of "existential distancing" means one feels uncomfortable and would avoid existential thinking. It is not related to social position and symbolic boundary, but rather the inner logic of the existential questions. It also echoes the trend of sequestration of death.

The third type listed above connects life and death with certain kind of meaning and order. For instance, Joyce witnessed the high death toll of children caused by the earthquake, and hence changed her attitude toward child-rearing. Shaun and Lily proposed ideals of a meaningful life. Bill explained the concept of fate and emphasized the importance of human agency in maintaining fitness. Generally speaking, the three cultural elites in favor of existential thinking (Deng, Lu, and Dong) also fall into this category.

The last type suspends meaning of, or control over, life and death. The respondents of this type either felt life as meaningless (Diane), or surrendered control over life to the course of fate (Nancy and Sherry). Unlike Bill, their discourses rendered human agency

as weak and limited.

The data shown above implies that the connection between existential thinking and daily practice is vague and ambiguous. The type that connects life and death with meaning and order shows that awareness of death could have *causal* power over one's practice, action, and philosophy of life. However, things are more complicated for other types, such as self-distancing and suspension of meaning or control. Under these categories, some people were not interested in existential questions (Daniel, Irene); some avoided them with fear (Alice, Dorothy); some expressed passive or conservative massages (Nancy, Sherry). However, many of them still participated in or even led social activities (work, business, dancing organizing) that made their lives meaningful. They show a decoupling of existential questions and real-life activities.

A possible explanation about it is that existential thinking in the face of disaster or a deadly situation is a possible source of empowerment that energizes one's real-life practices and actions. But it is not the only or necessary source. One who does not care about, or even feels bad about existential thinking could still generate high ambition in practical goals. Actually it is probably how things are for most people for most of the time.

Chapter Seven

Discussion and Conclusion

In this dissertation, I examine how the society regains meaning and order after the disaster from many different angles. As background knowledge, I present the past and the present of the two towns (Chapter Three). Then I look at moral struggles and judgments about life and death (Chapter Two), Meaning-making about the disaster (Chapter Four), meaning-making about life and death (Chapter Six), and the role of religious organizations as a specific type of meaning purveyor (Chapter Five). In this final chapter, I integrate these findings and extract some theoretical implications, including: the idea of culture boom, the theories of culture and action, the fact of cultural diversity and ambivalence, and the problem of trauma.

1. Social and cultural responses triggered by disaster

An anthropologist of disaster, Hoffman, summarizes two possible ways human societies and culture respond to disaster: change and preservation. She writes (1999:311):

> Disasters set a critical stage, both bringing out and igniting arenas of contestation within society. They are great motivators of social action, and social action motivates change. People do not sink into inertia in calamitous situations. They react. New groups and leaders emerge. As disasters cause numerous difficulties, they require departure, adjustment, and answers. They throw into stark light inequalities, struggles over power, the social as well as the physical matters that imperil and increase dissatisfaction. They raise questions of a metaphysical nature. They frequently accelerate processes of change already underway.
>
> On the other hand, in response to challenges and contestation, disasters also often promote cultural preservation and resistance to change. In particular when issues of redistribution of goods or power arise, the forces behind the status quo revive. All in all, disasters present extraordinary examples of the fluid quality of culture, the invention and reinvention of cultural goods, the areas of harmony, disjuncture, inconsistency, and coherence."

The findings in my dissertation show both change and preservation. First, the earthquake caused high casualty and loss of properties in the two towns, and then the government resettled the survivors in newly-built towns. The earthquake itself and its aftermath posed many problems to solve, questions to answer, and difficulties to face. Chapter Three demonstrates how the life world of town citizens was altered, and how they struggled to resume their new life. Most of them tried hard to continue their disrupted career and family. Some launched new career with high ambition, such as Irene, a businesswoman who wished to revive the economy of Hanwang. Meanwhile, there were "cultural entrepreneurs," the social agents who aimed to revive traditional and folk culture, either to enhance the visibility of then town or simply to maintain the communality of the town. Second, the disaster created extreme and unusual situations that hardly, if not impossibly, occur in ordinary life. These situations posed existential questions to the victims, including decisions about life and death, the meaning of the disaster, the meaning of life and death. As discussed below, they are not merely abstract questions hovering in one's head. Rather, they are linked to the individual-society relationship, politics of legitimacy, and the survivors' daily life and practices. Third, beside the local people, the general public also participated in the post-disaster reconstruction and recovery. I single out many kinds of institutional forces, including the government, NGOs, psychotherapy, religions, and the media. I dedicate Chapter Five to study religious organizations and agents, a special kind of "meaning purveyor." I look at how they participate in the post-disaster relief and reconstruction, how they preach religious message to local people.

The local society, the government, the outside supporters and bystanders altogether created a proliferation of discourses and practices. I call it "culture boom." It is a huge

cultural explosion in reaction to a huge black hole created by the disaster. It manifested in the planning of the reconstruction, the career of cultural entrepreneurs, the publication of survivor literature, the images and reportages produced by the media, the moral and political debates burgeoning in the public sphere, the scholarly researches, the supports and services offered by NGOs and volunteers, and so on. The term "boom" refers to huge mobilization of organizational, symbolic, and material resources (I quote some statistics in previous chapters, such as the number of NGO participating in the relief, the financial investment in the reconstruction); as well as the diversity, richness, and complexity of cultural contents emerging in respond to the disaster, such as the meaning-making about disaster, life, and death studied in this work.

I hypothesize that the occurrence of culture boom is determined by two factors: the scale of the disaster, and the potential energy of the society. First, the scale of the disaster (the severity of damage, the size of impacted area, etc) correlates the survivors' needs for help. In the same society, a larger disaster calls for more help and attention. For instance, the 2010 Yushu earthquake and the 2013 Ya'an earthquake in China brought about much less social support and cultural response than the 2008 Sichuan earthquake did, because of their much lower scale and severity. Second, the potential energy of the society means the maximum social support a society is able to generate and offer to the impacted area. Theoretically speaking, if a huge disaster occurred while the impacted society is weak and cannot handle the situation well, obviously there will be no boom at all. China is a big nation with huge population and ever-growing economic development. When the 2008 Sichuan earthquake occurred, the government, the civil society, the media, the culture industry, etc, all had sufficient energy to contribute their effort in the relief and

reconstruction. Things were different when the Tanshan earthquake occurred in 1976. The scale of this earthquake was even larger than the 2008 earthquake and caused 240,000 people die. However, the government controlled the media and did not allow the news to be widely spread. Hence the outside supports flowed to the impacted area, and the cultural representation of the disaster, were much limited.

The idea of culture boom is worthy of further developing. It has the potential to make contribution to the study of cultural production, treating calamity or suffering as a causal factor or "catalysis" of cultural production, and examining the richness and diversity of cultural responses to calamity.

2. Culture and action

In Chapter One, I review literature in cultural sociology that focuses on how culture is linked to action, agency, and practice. Scholars in this field have created many theories and models to explain the existence and functioning of culture, including Swidler's ideas of toolkit and cultural repertoire (1986, 2001), Vaisey's dual model (2009), Alexander's strong program (with Smith 2003), Giddens' and Archer's emphasis on reflexivity (Giddens 1991, Archer 2003). I myself touch this issue in Chapter Two, Chapter Four, and Chapter Six. They demonstrate different ways culture works in the society, including moral struggle, political agenda, existential impulse, and so on. These mechanisms can not be reduced by any simple causal model, no matter it treats culture as independent or depend variable.

Chapter Two deals with decisions about life and death. I suggest that moral practice and judgment involve three levels of reality: the body, cultural schema, and discourse. When the earthquake occur, the individual made decision of "Die for others vs. Escape

for oneself" out of bodily instinct or internalized cultural schema (duty). After the event, people (survivors and bystanders) might make moral judgment about those decisions. The commemoration of the self-sacrificing teachers and the debates on Mr. Fan's escape were a form of social control in the public space that attempted to define what/who is right or wrong. On the other hand, the dilemma of "Survive of others vs. Die in despair" is not a one-time decision, but rather an ongoing moral struggle in which bodily or psychological pain conflicts with moral imperatives imposed by the society.

This chapter dialogues with the "dual model" theory (Vaisey 2009, further adopted by Lizardo and Strand 2010) which uses "practical consciousness" and "discursive consciousness" to explain the connection between culture and action. This model tends to analyze the individual's consciousness and action in an individualistic viewpoint, and neglects the communications, struggles, and conflicts among different individuals or social groups. I suggest that the individual's decision of life and death when the earthquake occurred was determined by bodily instinct or unconscious schema, which roughly echoes the "practical consciousness" described in the dual model. However, the post hoc judgments and debates about that choice can be much complicated than merely "justification." Rather, it is a social contestation about right and wrong, and is more close to the "culture war" proposed by Hunter (1991, 2006).

Chapter Four examines how people construe the cause and meaning of the disaster, and how such theodicies are linked to social position, institution, and action. I sort out three threads: (i) the responsibility and legitimacy of the state; (ii) the religious theodicies; (iii) psychology of trauma and recovery. The first thread was manifested by two antagonistic social agents and interests in the public/political sphere. On the one hand, the government

invested huge resources and efforts in the "performance" of post-disaster relief and reconstruction, in order to maintain and even heighten its administrative legitimacy. On the other hand, a group of survivors and activists sought the cause of severe damage and the high death toll. They call for the investigation of "responsibility."

Meanwhile, the thread of religious theodicy is linked to moral judgment, boundary making, and the agendas of evangelism and moral cultivation. It urges people (believers, basically) to behave well and have faith in God. Lastly, the profession of psychotherapy guides the survivors to release emotion, to get through sorrow, and find new meanings in life. It tends to see the survivors' grief and resentment as individual problems in the private sphere, and use individualistic methodology to help them.

This chapter deals with this problem: The disaster created "unsettled time" (Swidler 1986, 2001) that threatened the "ontological security" of human beings (Giddens 1991). At this point, theodicy and sociodicy are created as a kind of "ideology" that aims to make sense of the disaster, to regain meaning and order, and to generate "strategies of action," that is, the social agendas summarized above. My empirical data contributes to existing literature of theodicy (Berger 1967; Morgan and Wilkinson 2001; Shweder et al. 1997; Simko 2012; Weber 1963b). It provides a systematic comparison of different paradigms of theodicy, looking at their social location, inner logic, and their linkages with actions and daily life.

Chapter Six looks at how the individual construes the meaning of life and death, and whether/how this existential thinking is connected to his social position and daily practice. I find that meaning-making about life and death could have causal power to the individual's practice and agency. It triggers one to pursue certain goal or way of life, and

hold a positive or peaceful attitude toward suffering. However, "distancing" and "suspension" are also possible responses (discussed below). This chapter dialogues with sociology of death (Bauman 1992; Mellor 1993; Walter 1991; Willmott 2000). Complementary with their theoretical and historical approach, I look at the connection between existential questions of life and death on the one hand, and the profane daily life on the other hand.

As discussed in Chapter One, literature of culture and action indicates the inconsistency and contradiction between one says and one does. It can be found in the empirical data presented in previous chapters. For instance, in Chapter Four, I documented two Christian respondents' theodicy that sees Sichuanese people as sinners. However, they still interacted and made connection with others in certain ways. It demonstrates the relatively independence between what one says and what one acts. The two realms have their own logics and both mean something to the individual.

Another dimension of the findings in this dissertation is the diversity, ambivalence, and uncertainty of meaning-making. I will discuss it in the next section.

3. Ambivalence, diversity, and uncertainty

The meaning-making of disaster, life, and death do not follow a single, simple pattern. Rather, it is full of ambivalence, diversity, and uncertainty. Some kinds of meaning-making come from existing cultural or institutional sources. Some do not. From a skeptical or nihilist viewpoint, no meaning is solid, constant, and unquestionable. It is a matter of faith and interpretation. One could gain a sense of meaningfulness, a sense of security and control when one *believes* certain narrative that provides meaning. One could be skeptical and rejects any meaningful narrative. One could find meaning in

nonverbal sources, such as relationship and practice.

In each of my dissertation chapters, I demonstrate diverse types of meaning-making on certain topic. In Chapter Two, I summarize five types of discourse about life/death choice: Individualistic discourse, orthodox discourse, therapeutic discourse, death discourse, and acceptive discourse. The binary antagonism between the individualistic and orthodox discourses is a typical and everlasting cultural theme in the context of modernity. They hold contrasting views about the individual-society relationship, and advocate different moral demands, i.e., freedom, right, responsibility, and duty. On the other hand, the therapeutic discourse is performed by the profession of psychotherapy, a product of western modernization. It does not strongly impose an imperative to the individual, but rather guide him toward certain (positive) attitude by subtle techniques. The acceptive discourse can also be traced to traditional or religious culture, such as the concept of fate. The most idiosyncratic type of discourse, the death discourse, does not seem to have a clear cultural and institutional source, since it is a forbidden and repressed voice under the mainstream ideology. It reveals how the individual (like those cases presented in the chapter) might mobilize cultural and linguistic elements to create a narrative that appears to be "asocial."

Chapter Four examines different paradigms and versions of theodicy. The antagonism between the state and civil society on the issue of responsibility can be explained by social position. It is the government's interest to maintain its regime legitimacy. It is the bereaved parents' interest to call for compensation for their children's death. It would be surprising if they act differently. However, the ambivalence of religious theodicy seems to be inherent in the ambivalent nature of religious texts and teachings, rather than the

believers' social positions. Different versions of punitive theodicy and non-punitive theodicy co-exist in the Scripture, and the believers might prefer certain one over the others (suppose they really learned them all). Not to mention the fact that different believers might interpret the same text differently.

Similarly, Chapter Six shows the diverse responses to existential questions about life and death. Some people were propelled by an existential impulse, and thus actively sought the meaning of life and death. Some others were obstructed by symbolic exclusion or existential fear, and did not want to think about that problem (I call them categorical and existential distancing). It is unclear what exactly determines one to fall into any of these categories. In the meantime, both existential meaning-searching and profane, pragmatic concerns have the potential of generating high ambition of achievement one's daily life.

Whether or not one is satisfied by any meaning-making of disaster is also ambivalent. Feng Xiaojuan, A writer who witnessed the earthquake, wrote her discontent with well-known cultural explanations about disaster and death (Qin, 2009:416):

> I recalled a passage in the Old Testament. God was to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. The righteous man, Abraham, bargained with God and forced Him to compromise. God said: "If there are ten righteous people, I would not destroy that city." I am dare to say, in the central areas of this "5.12" earthquake, Yinxiu Town in Wenchuan and the capital of Beichuan, ninety-nine percent of the inhabitants are kind and friendly subjects, are hard-working righteous people. Why did God destroy these two towns, and tear down so many families?
>
> There is no answer. The scientific explanation is always so calm and hence frustrating (*xinhan*): Earthquake is a process by which the earth's crust releases energy.
>
> I recall the voice of Laozi:
>
> "Nature is unkind: It treats the creation like sacrificial straw-dogs."[136]
>
> In the face of the unkind Nature, in the face of disasters, plagues, and floods, we are really

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[136] This passage also appeared in Chapter Six, a quotation of Yashi's essay.

"straw-dogs" with no shelter and protection!

It seems that we cannot refuse to accept such a misfortune.

Feng listed three kinds of explanations of disaster: religious, scientific, and philosophical ones. She was not satisfied with the religious theodicy about human sin, because she thought the town citizens were good people. The scientific explanation is credible. But its detached attitude renders people's life and death as meaningless, and hence can hardly comfort anyone. The last explanation Feng quoted is an old Chinese saying about the indifference of Nature (also quoted in Chapter Six). At this point, she had no choice but to accept the misfortune. Contrastingly, in Chapter Four and Five, I present many cases of religious believers who were either convinced or comforted by religious discourses. A Christian used the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to explain the disaster, and she thought that people are indeed sinners.

Another kind of meaning-making not well-presented in previous chapters is that one could find meaning through nonverbal sources. I introduce a case to demonstrate this. A group of psychologists worked in Beichuan County and performed psychological intervention for three years. They published an essay collection about people they met and interacted with (Jia, Huang and Liang 2012). They noticed an old woman who lost her family (p.5):

In the resettlement site we offered service, there was a 73-year-old female villager. Her eleven relatives, including husband, son and daughter, grand sons and daughters, all died in the earthquake…When she asked: "Why should I live?" with a hoarse voice, we don't know how to answer.

Besides silence, still silence.

We worried much if she would do something bad, and yet had no way to help her.

Few months later, she left the resettlement site.

She went back to the big mountain, her homeland where there was a big family, and set a tent

at the debris, feeding two porkets there. She lived and ate with the porkets, feeding them as her own children.

Two years passed, she was still alive. Her instinctual, simple way of healing was more useful than any school of psychotherapy.

In this story, the loss and regaining of meaning were beyond clear and speakable logic. In the beginning, the old woman lost her entire family in the earthquake. When the psychotherapists met her (the quoted text does not specify the circumstance of their encounter), she asked: "Why should live?" And they could not answer it. This case contrasts the orthodox and therapeutic discourses presented in Chapter Two, which expressed redefinitions of life and imperatives of survival. It rather showed a vacuum of meaning, in which the survivor who suffered from loss and outside supporters who might want to help were unable to answer the question about meaning. Timing is a factor that caused this vacuum. Shortly after the disaster and the huge loss, any answer would seem inadequate and even inappropriate. However, as time went by, the old woman found her own way of resuming a new life. She went back to her collapsed house and lived with two porkets (feeding livestock is common in rural and semi-rural places). The writer interprets that she treated the porkets as her own children, and it worked as a self-healing.

The meaning vacuum shortly after the disaster and the self-healing long after the disaster, shown in this case, imply that trauma and healing can happen in a nonverbal, nonlinguistic way, through the functioning of relationship and practice in daily life (and that relationship can be one between human and nonhuman). This case also shows that psychotherapy, as well as any other explicitly articulated cultural repertoire, are not the only and necessary means of healing.

4. The articulation and elusion of trauma

In Chapter One, I reviewed "trauma" as a sub-category of suffering. Similar to moral

judgment and meaning-making discussed above, trauma exists and manifests in many different ways. For instance, Erikson (1976) visited the Buffalo Creek survivors one year after the 1972 flood. In his fieldwork and interviews, he found signs of individual trauma, e.g., shock, numbness, guilt, sense of loss, etc, as well as collective trauma, that is, loss of communality.

After the Sichuan earthquake, trauma has been very much documented and articulated via survivor literature, images and reportages, scholarly researches, public mourning, and many other channels. However, trauma is not always explicitly articulated and easily approachable. It can be concealed and elusive as well. It is difficult for researchers to really "see" it unless they establish deep relationships with the survivors. When I conducted fieldwork in Sichuan, it was four years after the disaster (2012-2013), and the survivors living in the new towns already started a new "normal" life with constant routine. They generally did not show sorrow or hopelessness openly.

A documented case demonstrates the way trauma can be deeply concealed, and the way the survivors might find they own ways to heal it. Miss Jia, a member of the therapist team reviewed above, noted the story of Mr. Meng, the principal of an elementary school in Beichuan. The therapist team collaborated with him to conduct psychotherapy for students and teachers in his school. Mr. Meng's son was a student in Beichuan High School, who died in the earthquake. Jia noticed that he dedicated himself in working all day long. He appeared to be strong-minded and almost never revealed his sorrow to the therapists. During the three years when Jia worked in Beichuan, she found that Mr. Meng and other teachers who lost their children disappeared during the Chinese New Years and the anniversaries of the earthquake. She did not ask them about it when

they came back after the occasions. When Jia was about to close the therapy service and leave Beichuan, Meng had a talk with her, sharing his true feelings about losing his son: After the earthquake, Meng could hardly get sleep at night. He made himself sleepy by drinking, watching television, browsing internet, or play mahjong with other bereaved teachers.

He kept sending text messages to his son's cell phone, which was buried in the debris of the school, for three month. Jia noted Meng's explanation of his disappearance on the occasions mentioned above (Jia et al 2012:137-8):

> "I don't want you to see us being so painful, and don't want you to see me cry. That's it." He smoked nonstoppingly, and there were many cigarette ends in the ashtray. "Now I can tell you, during that New Year, I brought my wife and those teachers who lost children to a hotel in Mianyang. We stayed together there for three days. I told the crews of the hotel that we are victims who lost relatives, we want to cry in the hotel, and told them not to disturb us and worry about us. On May 12th, 2009, I brought the teachers to the Chinese Dead Sea (a salt lake in Sichuan, also a tourist spot) to release our emotions. At 2:28pm (the time when the earthquake occurred), I and all teachers jumped into the sea, and cried in the sea until it was enough. At that moment, I recalled my son. My heart pained like there was a knife twisting it. I could hardly bear it!"

After Meng shared his story, Jia gave him suggestions to bid farewell with his son, and she herself also cried after leaving his office. This case indicates the difficulty of detecting and observing the survivor's deeply hidden trauma, especially when one is not willing to share his feeling with others. Meng could finally share his story with Jia only because they have established a rapport through three years of collaboration. Of course, this rapport is hard to gain for outside researchers who only stayed at the research site for a short time. This fact further implies that there is always something inside the people's mind that the researchers can never approach.

5. Limitations of this dissertation

This dissertation aims to examine meaning-making about disaster, life and death after the Sichuan earthquake. Although I present findings of many topics, there are limitations as well. Here I list two (far from all) of them.

(1) Cross-cultural comparison

Due to limited resources and time, this research mainly focuses on Chinese society and does not acquire empirical data of disasters in other societies. Some topics I select are also rarely seen in other disaster researches (especially Chapter Two and Six). It causes a deficit that one can hardly tell whether the findings are unique or universal across different societies. This problem calls for improvement in the future.

One possible direction of cross-cultural comparison is the role of the state. Several researches have criticized Chinese government's reconstruction policies, as well as its excessive regulations on NGOs and other forms of public participation (Lin 2012; Roney 2011; Shieh and Deng 2011; Xu 2011). As for my research, in Chapter Three and Four, I introduce the state's reconstruction policies and theodical discourses used for maintaining its legitimacy. This angle has not been well explored in the area of disaster research. A comparative study on different governments' behaviors might help us to gain knowledge about "whether/how a government could act differently."

The second possible topic is religious culture. Including my case of China, most contemporary researches on religious theodicy focus on non-western society (Adeney-Risakotta 2009; Chester and Duncan 2010; Shweder 2008). Major scholars on theodicy assume that religion has declined in western society for centuries, and people are less and less likely to appeal to religion to cope with disaster and suffering (Berger 1967; Morgan

and Wilkinson 2001; Weber 1958a). It is worth while to test whether this assumption is really true, and see how religious theodicy works in western societies nowadays.

(2) Access of data

First, it was extremely hard to get a printed document of official authorization for my research. It limited my "legal" access to many resources and people, especially governmental resources, such as demographic data of town citizens, rates of employment, detailed information of reconstruction planning, and so on. However, I still managed to interview some governmental staffers of lower and middle level (see Appendix 1).

Second, I sought interviewees basically by snow ball sampling. In this way, people I interviewed tended be those who had social network, those who trusted outsiders, and those who were outgoing and willing to talk. Some important social groups were difficult to access for many reasons, including high school students, people who work in *danwei*, people who left the towns, people with scarce social network, people who distrust outsiders, and those unwilling to talk. As a consequence, the data acquired in my fieldwork might be biased in certain way.

6. Conclusion

My dissertation studies cultural responses and recovery after the Sichuan earthquake in China. Based on Geertz's idea of "webs of significance" and Giddens' idea of "ontological security," I construe "culture" as a system of meaning and order by which the individual and society maintains their sense of security, control, and continuity. A catastrophic event can challenge this system, and create an "unsettled time" (Swidler) that poses questions to answer, problems to solve, difficulties to confront, as well as opportunities of reshaping the moral orders and power relations.

The Chinese society responded to the earthquake by mobilizing huge institutional, cultural, and material resources, which altogether created a "culture boom." I focus on existential issues triggered by the disaster, including decisions about life and death, the meaning-making about the disaster, and the meaning-making about life and death. The findings dialogue with literature of culture and action, literature of suffering and theodicy, and the sociology of death. I provide a systematic picture about the diverse responses of Chinese society to those issues. I also look at the linkage between existential issues and social actions in daily life. Several structural, institutional factors and cultural resources are found involved in these topics. However, there is also a huge room of ambivalence and uncertainty.

Appendix 1: Basic information of interviewees

Local survivors

Abbreviates for Education level

  E: Elementary school
  J: Junior high school
  H: High school
  VH: Vocational high school
  C: College
  VC: Vocational college
  IN: Incomplete
  Blank: Unspecified

The interviewees' ages were recorded at the time of interviews.

1. Current residents in New Hanwang and adjacent areas

Number	Sex	Age	Education	Social category
H01	F	25	VH	Self-employed
H02	F	30+	J	Housewife
H03	F	43	H	Housewife
H04	M			Self-Employed
H05	F	60		Aged/Retired
H06	F	33	E	Housewife
H07	M			Aged/Retired
H08	F	60	E	Aged/Retired
H09	F	40+	J	Employed
H10	M	66	VH	Aged/Retired
H11	M		E (IN)	Employed
H12	F	45	J	Aged/Retired
H13	F	43	E	Housewife
H14	M	77		Aged/Retired
H15	F	17	VH	Student
H16	F	66	E	Aged/Retired
H17	M	30+	JH	Housewife
H18	F	40+	H	Employed
H19	M	40	E	Employed
H20	F	37	J	Self-employed
H21	M	38	H	Self-employed
H22	F	30+	J	Housewife
H23	F	40	H	Employer
H24	M	30+	C	Employed
H25	F	48	J (IN)	Housewife
H26	F	39	J (IN)	Others

Number	Sex	Age	Education	
H27	M	41	H	Employed
H28	F	38	VC	Employed
H29	M	48	H	Employed
H30	F	33	C	Employed
H31	M	66	H	Self employed
H32	M	66	J	Aged/Retired
H33	M	65	VH	Aged/Retired
H34	M	67	J	Aged/Retired
H35	F	56	E	Employer
H36	F	28	C	Employed

2. Current residents in New Beichuan

Number	Sex	Age	Education	
B01	F	59		Aged/Retired
B02	F	60		Aged/Retired
B03	F	64		Aged/Retired
B04	F	72	E (IN)	Aged/Retired
B05	F	59	E	Aged/Retired
B06	F	64	E	Aged/Retired
B07	M	54	E (IN)	Other
B08	F	49	J (IN)	Employed
B09	F	58	E	Aged/Retired
B10	M	36	VH	Employer
B11	F	69	E	Aged/Retired
B12	M	37	C	Employed
B13	F	21	C (current)	Student
B14	F	36	H	Housewife
B15	F	48	H	Housewife
B16	F	39	J (IN)	Housewife
B17	M	32	J	Self-employed
B18	M	30	C	Employed
B19	F	40+	H	Employed
B20	F	21	C (current)	Student
B21	M	47		Self-employed
B22	M	24	VC	Employed
B23	M	47	C	Employed
B24	M	46	C	Employed
B25	F	60		Other
B26	M	67	H	Self-employed

Appendix 2: Interview schedule

Project: Meaning, Order, and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake
Investigator: Da-Wei Hsu

The interview questions listed below are issues relevant to my study. However, in real conservations and interactions with local survivors, I will adjust the exact wording to make it friendlier and understandable to them. In other words, this list is basically a memo for me myself; the true conversations will be more flexible and more tuned to the survivors' life world. Also, I will pay attention to what the residents say in daily life, rather than stick to these questions strictly.

1. Life in the past

Would you talk about your life before the earthquake? For example:
Were you born native in this town (or city, village, etc) or from other place?
What was your career?
Who did you live with? Were you married? Did you have any child?
Were you satisfied with the life before the earthquake?

2. Experience about the earthquake

Would you describe what happened to you when the earthquake occurred?
How did you survive the earthquake?

3. Social network and social relation

3a) Family
Did you lose any family in the earthquake?
Did any of your family members leave the town after the earthquake? What for?
Do you maintain frequent connection with your family members and relatives?

3c) Social network in general
Did your social network severely damaged?
Did you, and how did you establish new social network?
Do you connect with other people (beyond family) frequently?
Do you make friends with other survivors?

4. Current situation and values

If you lost your job due to the earthquake, did you successfully find a new job? How?
If you do not have a job or income resource now, how do you make your living?
What is the most crucial task or difficulty confront with you in recent days?

What are the issues or problems you are concerned with the most?

What do you value the most?
Take a recent event for example, how do you make decisions on important life events?

After the earthquake, have you or your family undergone any change in thoughts, values and life styles?
After the earthquake, have you seen any other people undergo any change in thoughts, values and life styles?
(For instance, some people cared about wealth and status before, but not so after the earthquake. Some people were selfish before, but became more willing to help after the earthquake.)

5. Interactions and relationships with meaning providers

5a) Psychological intervention
How did you endure the hard time right after the quake?
Have you ever received psychotherapy? How did it work? Was it helpful?
How did you and the therapist (or consultant) talk about the disaster and suffering?

5b) Volunteer and social worker
Did you ever interact with any volunteer or social worker? How and how often?
What service, message or knowledge did they offer?
How do you evaluate their services and messages?
Did you gain anything from the interactions?

5c) Religion
Do you believe in any religion before/after the earthquake?
Did anybody preach religion to you after the earthquake? How?
Did religion help you get through the hard times? How?

7. Worldview

How do you think of the meaning of the disaster, if you ever though of it?
Did you ever think of the meaning of life and death?
Do you think that future is uncertain and unpredictable?
What did you lose and gain after the earthquake?
How do you think about and plan for your future?
How did the earthquake change your life and future?

7. Basic information
Name:
Sex:
Birth year:
Education:
Resident location:
Occupation:

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