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The building of social resilience in Sichuan after the Wenchuan earthquake: A perspective of the socio-government interactions

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Abstract

In November 2007, China implemented its Emergency Response Law to ensure national unified leadership and collaboration when responding to emergencies. In recent years, China's main focuses for enhancing disaster management have included emergency preparation, emergency management, and legal system mechanisms. However, its well-designed management system faced a great challenge during the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. By examining the literature on the development of disaster management, we realized that enhancing self-organization in communities can effectively resolve problems caused by collective actions and strengthen resilience to disasters.

In the decade since the Wenchuan earthquake, the literature has focused more on empowering communities during disaster management in China. However, literature on the compatibility of social resilience and the government-dominant model in China is still scant. This study investigates China's current disaster management system design; specifically, it identifies ways and methods for counteracting any conflicts between disaster management under social synergies and China's emergency management system. It further explores what factors facilitate the balance between social synergies and the emergency management system if the two concepts were fused together. Using case studies, in-depth interviews, and a focus group in the field of public administration, this study collected qualitative data to understand the changes in China's disaster management system since the Wenchuan earthquake as well as provide recommendations for future reform.

1. Introduction

In the past 20 years, disaster prevention and rescue operation systems have become an important issue discussed in related fields (Buck, Trainor and Aguirre, 2006; Hsiung et al. (2010); Stumpf, 1999; Yang, 2009). In order to deal with an increasing number of disasters, the Chinese government initiated research on mitigation-related programs. For example, in April 1998, the State Council promulgated and implemented the Disaster Reduction Plan of the People's Republic of China (1998–2010); in August 2007, the government promulgated the National Comprehensive Disaster Reduction Eleventh Five-Year Plan. Such efforts aimed to further emphasize the role and function of social participation. Also in 2007, the National People's Congress officially adopted the Emergency Response Law of the People's Republic of China, which went into effect on November 1. Articles 6 and 48 of this act regulate, respectively, the “establishment of an effective social mobilization mechanism by the nation” and “the people's government ... immediately organize relevant departments to mobilize emergency rescue teams and social forces.”

However, the above-mentioned plans were challenged by the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, which forced the government to shift efforts to further strengthen emergency management with an “emergency plan” and “emergency management system, construction of mechanism and legal system” (i.e., three-in-one measurements) (Tong and Zhang, 2012, pp. 23, 28). By the end of 2008, China had established 35 laws, 37 administrative regulations, 55 institutional rules, and 111 documents related to emergency response development (Yu, 2016, pp. 41–42). In October 2016, the National Committee for Disaster Reduction issued China's Disaster Reduction Action Plan during the Twelfth Five-Years, which included four aspects: regulations and institutional mechanisms...
related to preventing, reducing, and relieving disasters; capacity building; community involvement; and international cooperation related to the resulting analysis (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016, accessed on 2017/12/10). In 2018, the National People’s Congress approved the establishment of a new agency, the Ministry of Emergency Management, to further strengthen the overall management of emergencies and non-emergency events as well as improve the overall levels of emergency management in order to integrate various emergency rescue forces.

Such developments show that the non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs) and the government’s cooperation mechanisms and responses to the public crisis have gradually gained importance in China in recent years (Wang, 2009). However, as disagreements or contradictions occur when different units or departments cooperate in disaster management, there is an urgent need to establish a system between the public and private sectors through collaborative relationships to facilitate cooperative reciprocity (Chen, 2008, p. 40). In other words, it is important to consider how to interact with and coordinate disaster-relief NGOs with inter-governmental, inter-departmental, and/or civil organizations to construct disaster resilience and implement post-disaster recovery measurements (Benson et al., 2001; Mushkatel and Wescher, 1985; Rubin and Barbee, 1985).

This article explores the compatibility of Western literature on disaster management and social resilience with China’s governance structure. Although the Chinese government wants to be more open to public participation under the traditional administratively oriented system, the level of openness is still deeply influenced by the government system. On one hand, the government wants to open authorization to allow decentralization; however, because of institutional problems, there are still limitations. On the other hand, society also wants to contribute to or expects to expand autonomous governance. However, barriers such as a lack of resources and space have kept them from entering the disaster management network (Wang, 2009; Wang and Chang, 2011).

The main research question of this study is: How has social resilience been built since the Wenchuan earthquake? This paper adopts the viewpoint of the dynamic interaction of multiple actors to emphasize how social organizations and communities play a role in socio-government interactions and strengthen the resilience of the government and social organizations during disasters. The article first reviews the relevant literature on the interaction between Chinese society and the government as well as disaster management, and it examines the current situation and major challenges of disaster prevention and rescue-related mechanisms in China. This study collects qualitative data through in-depth interviews and analyzes the development of disaster resilience construction in the 10 years since the Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan in 2008. It also analyzes feasible strategies for future disaster self-organization from different perspectives.

2. Building social resilience in China

2.1. Development and challenges of disaster management in China

The development of disaster management in China has been highly valued in the past decade. Scholars have examined the literature on disasters in China from 1999 to 2007, which included 1023 records, as well as between 2008 and 2017, which included 9285 records. There are 3461 articles on the Wenchuan earthquake alone (Wang et al., 2019). Since the 1950s, China has endured several major natural disasters, such as the Tangshan earthquake and Yangtze River floods. Knowing how to deal with natural disasters has gradually attracted the government’s attention. The United Nations proposed the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction in 1990, which facilitated China’s establishment of the National Committee for Disaster Reduction to improve cooperation among different departments and agencies at the state level. Thus, China’s first generation of disaster management paid more attention to natural disasters and the role of the government at the state level (Zhang, 2012).

In 2003, facing the challenges of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreaks, the Chinese government reviewed its disaster management system and initiated reforms for a second generation of development (Wang et al., 2016). The disaster management system of this period generally focused on different types of disasters as well as coordination among various agencies and departments (Lu and Han, 2018; Zhang, 2012).

The Emergency Response Law of the People’s Republic of China, issued in 2007, adopted the government-led model. Article 4 of this law decrees that “the state shall establish an emergency response system mainly featuring the unified leadership, comprehensive coordination, categorized management, graded responsibility and territorial management.” Meanwhile, Article 6 decrees that “the state shall establish an effective social mobilization mechanism to strengthen the awareness of public safety and risk prevention and control of all citizens and improve the ability of risk avoidance and rescue in the whole society.”

The seemingly well-designed system encountered severe challenges, particularly after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. In Zhong (2007), Zhong pointed out that “the ineffective system and political sensitivity of crisis management means that China is likely to become more vulnerable to disasters, disturbances, and other critical contingencies” (p. 92). Under China’s one-party political system, the mobilization of various areas to persuade or even force members of political groups or other members of society to identify, obey, cooperate, and support lacks sustainability (Wang, 2009; Zhang, 2012).

The literature has highlighted the importance of NGOs’ and civil society’s participation in disaster management systems (Lu and Xu, 2015; Łukaszczyk and Williamson, 2010; Meier, 1995). Ten years after the Wenchuan earthquake, systematically examining the interaction between government and NGOs in the disaster management system and constructing an effective and sound resilience system have become critical and urgent issues.

2.2. The need for self-organization in disaster management in China

The one-party political system with an authoritarian regime in China has three main characteristics: it is led by the Communist Party of China (CPC) party, it has a high level of hierarchy, and it has a strong and robust ability to gather resources at higher levels of government (Zhang, 2012). In recent years, this system has been challenged in terms of its disaster response performance and effectiveness in large-scale disasters. Although some scholars have pointed out the advantages of control and command systems and have considered the system a force for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of disaster response (Gao, 2008; Shan and Chen, 2007), others have asserted that China’s organizational structure and response model should be more flexible to improve disaster management performance (Guo and Kapucu, 2015; Liu and Xiang, 2005).

Comfort (1994) argued that disaster management networks can be understood as self-organizing systems, which is an important corrective action for the assumptions of central planning. With its non-linear and dynamic nature, society can produce a self-organizing process sufficient to reallocate resources and actions so that the crisis is reduced, and society thus continues to operate stably. In other words, self-organization provides a more simple and effective way to deal with complex work than the traditional mechanical view of the organization (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) described organizations as being adaptable, flexible, self-renewing, and self-leaning while also having clever features. These characteristics only exist in a living system. Modern organizations have increasingly emphasized complex adaptive systems. A complex environment includes five characteristics: they are composed of many agents who act and interact in unpredictable ways; they are sensitive to changes in the initial state; they
adapt their behavior to the environment in an unpredictable way; they swing between stability and instability; and when an imbalance is encountered, they make emergency moves, meaning the complex system is dynamic and non-linear. The concept of emergency self-organization is a complex theory of “anchor phenomenon” (Plowman et al., 2007).

Comfort (1994) pointed out that, in a rapidly changing environment, in order to assess the existence of self-organization and its performance in the social system, the concept of self-organization needs to be redefined and explained. First, self-organization is a process in a social context through continuous interaction in a scenario. Through verbal, written, or electronic forms of communication involving two or more participants, these behaviors become the most common ones within the system or between the system and the environment. These actions may also include different forms of communication, such as non-verbal communication or the use of symbols. It indirectly delivers powerful information through examples and actions. Communication behavior includes direct and indirect forms, and these behaviors are the foundation in the process of self-organization. The three elements of self-organization include identity, information, and relationships. Additional characteristics include that the intrinsic driving force in this process of communication is the creative self-expression desire or “autopoiesis”; self-organization, along with selections, creates the system’s capacity to adapt to environmental conditions; self-organization recognizes that some units exert influence and control over other units in an interdependent system; and self-organizing systems are massively parallel operational systems (Comfort, 1994; Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

According to The Logic of Collective Action (Olson, 1965), unless there are very few members in a group or there are mandatory special designs, neither a rational nor self-interested individual will take action for public interest. In a risk-prone society, individuals will take actions and pay attention to their own interests to reduce any individual potential crises (such as the quality of buildings in which they live and the re-planning of illegally constructed areas). However, when it comes to improving collective actions to strengthen the resilience of the community, there are only a few actions, and the discussions on self-organization are effective actions to solve collective problems (Jan 2004).

The significance and importance of self-organization in disaster management has gradually emerged from the previously discussed literature. However, when examining the system in China, it is necessary to understand that the government still plays a critical role in disaster management. In other words, ensuring good interactions between the government and society during disaster management is a key direction that any post-Wenchuan earthquake reforms of the disaster management system should follow.

2.3. Building social resilience in China: socio-government interactions

The concept of resilience appeared earlier in the field of engineering, ecosystems, and socio-ecological studies (Brand and Jax, 2007; Folke, 2006). In social sciences, resilience can be defined as “capacity for collective action in the face of unexpected extreme events that shatter infrastructure and disrupt normal operating conditions” (Comfort et al., 2010, p. 33). In terms of crisis and disaster management, Boin, Comfort, and Demchak (2010, pp. 2–5) pointed out that, for non-routine emergencies, the so-called low-chance, high impact incident has made it difficult for the government to respond using the four stages of traditional disaster management (mitigation/prevention, preparation, response, and recovery). Resilience depends on this social system, the learning of past disasters to achieve better protection in the future, and the degree of self-organization of risk reduction measures (Jan 2013).

In recent years, the literature has gradually developed a resilience system model from a cooperative perspective, demonstrating that a community’s capabilities are important for improving disaster resilience. For example, Norris et al. (2008) considered community resilience as a set of networked adaptive capacities. This network includes four major elements: economic development, social capital, information communication, and community capabilities. Ronan and Johnston (2010) proposed the Strengthening Systems 4R Prevention Model, in which system resilience means the communities affected by disaster are able to cooperate and communicate with various organizations, experts, and community groups to face disasters and crises.

In the past, different levels of government units have often played the role of command and coordination in a major disaster whereas civil rescue teams from different organizations were the first responders at the front lines. However, in some cases, the government is unable to effectively control and deploy sufficient rescue organizations and related resources, resulting in overlapping resources or faults and, thus, weakened disaster relief (Liu et al., 2003). The interaction between government and non-government actors has become a trend in future disaster prevention and rescue, making it important to understand how to properly use NGOs’ resources for disaster management (Huang et al., 2012; Lin, 2013). In the face of large-scale disasters, the government’s disaster prevention capability is far from the threat posed by the disaster itself. Therefore, determining NGOs’ role in the traditional government-based disaster management system has become an important issue for public governance. NGOs can play at least eight roles in disaster prevention and rescue: organizers, coordinators, resource integrators, information communicators, supporters, counselors and educators, consultants, and advocates (Zhou and Wang, 2010).

However, observations of the relationship between state and society in China make it evident that the development of the country’s non-profit organizations (NPOs) and the search for a model for the development of Chinese civil society are topics that concern many scholars. There are also some important issues worthy of discussion, such as the duality of government and the people and the dual nature of the Chinese society (Kang, 1999; Sun, 1994); the three pathways—namely, from the bottom up, top down, and cooperation (Jia, 2003); and the administrative absorption of society (Kang et al., 2010). Liu (2007) identified three features of China’s current NPO legal system: dual control over management systems, permitting and laissez-faire approach in management processes, and restrictions on competition and inhibited development in management strategies. The interpretation of these models highlights the fact that the government still plays the dominant role when interacting with society.

The government’s interactions with civil society organizations, voluntary organizations, and NGOs during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake have received extensive attention. Wang (2009, p. 31) pointed out that “the government’s drawbacks and deficiencies in public crisis management are mainly because it is difficult to sustain.” Under the propaganda and encouragement of political entities, mainly political parties, the entire political system plays the role of persuading and even forcing members of political groups or other members of the society to accept, obey, cooperate, and support the capacity of the entire political system. However, such mobilization lacks sustainability. Tong and Zhang (2012) demonstrated that, due to China’s long-term policy restrictions, the development of Chinese civil organizations still has a long way to go. Although more than 300 civil society organizations were mobilized for disaster relief following the earthquake, with more than 3 million volunteers participating in the action (optimists even consider 2008 as China’s first year of civil society), a year later, the number of NGOs still within the disaster-stricken area had likely fallen below 50, with fewer than 50,000 total volunteers. Therefore, through training and management development, NGOs’ involvement during emergency and social mobilization mechanisms can be conventionalized.

The pre-zero draft of the post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction of the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (WCDRR) stated that such efforts: [need] to be reinforced further by the post-2015 framework for
disaster risk reduction with a much stronger focus on anticipating long-term risk scenarios and concrete measures to prevent the creation of new risk, reduce the existing risk and strengthen economic and social resilience of countries and people, by addressing both people and assets’ exposure and vulnerability. (UNISDR, 2014, p. 3)

The social resilience perspective emphasizes the social motivation and collective action ability of the people during disasters (Manyena, 2006). The scope includes the influence of individuals or communities on collective behavior, collective decision, and collective actions with various informal institutions. Important focuses of such efforts are how local informal institutions can help overcome the difficulties of collective action and form the interaction between local organizations and the state as well as contribute to society (Li and Lin, 2014).

Social resilience involves social entities—whether individuals, organizations, or communities—and their ability to tolerate, absorb, respond to, and adapt to various environmental and social threats (Keck and Sakdapolrak, 2013). Maguire and Hagan (2007, pp. 16–17) pointed out that social resilience is the capacity of a social entity (e.g., a group or community) to “bounce back” or respond positively to adversity which is understood as having three properties comprising aspects of how people respond to disasters: resistance, recovery, and creativity.

The literature has suggested that an array of factors may impact social resilience, including trust (e.g., Enemark, 2006), social cohesion and a sense of community (e.g., Poynting, 2006), and communication and information (e.g., Ink, 2006).

Zolli and Healy (2013) pointed out two ways to enhance resilience: enhance its ability to fend off and overcome the limitation during these major damages (even when permanent damage is caused) and maintain (or even expand) survival ability in the ever-changing environment in order to adapt to the new environment healthily, even when pushed to the limits. From economics to ecology, almost all resilience systems have a rigorous feedback mechanism to detect upcoming mutations or critical limitations. For example, in an ecosystem such as the coral reefs, some organisms may change their behavior due to environmental degradation. The same behavior also applies to human society, except that we rely heavily on various tools and techniques to strengthen our alertness to the environment. When sensing information that the system is about to cross its limitation, a system with true resilience uses dynamically reorganized efforts to ensure that the mission is continued, and the scale of operations is maintained. Many systems have built-in counteracting mechanisms that start working once the crisis occurs; the counter-measure mechanism attacks like the human immune system, restoring the system to a normal state. Aldrich (2012) pointed out the importance of social capital for building social resilience in post-disaster recovery, and the cultivation of trust is the key factor in accumulating social capital (Newton, 2001).

3. Methodology

On May 12, 2008, Sichuan Province in mainland China experienced a magnitude 8.0 earthquake (also known as the Wenchuan earthquake) that killed almost 70,000 people, injured more than 370,000, and left almost 18,000 missing. In addition, nearly 4 million buildings collapsed or were damaged. More than 15 million people needed emergency resettlement, and the estimated economic losses were roughly 845 billion RMB, making it the most severe disaster since the Tangshan earthquake in 1976 (China News, 2008/9/25).

From a social perspective, the relevant functions of emergency management in the past are distributed in multiple departments and at different levels of government. The function is unclear, and there is a lack of institutional mechanisms for emergency management as well as a lack of efforts by the public, the media, volunteers, and NGOs. When it comes to the exchange and cooperation of external resources, there is a widespread phenomenon of mobilization and light coordination, and social organizations are slow to develop their ability to participate in disaster relief (Xue and Tao, 2013; Zhang et al., 2011; Zhang and Zhang, 2016).

In March 2018, China established the Emergency Management Department, which had an important impact on the entire disaster management system. In order to understand and analyze how the government worked together with civil organizations, volunteer organizations, and community organizations in order to enhance social resilience after the Wenchuan earthquake, this study collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions from 2016 to 2018. The main purpose of the in-depth interviews was to explore, realize, and understand the life experiences of others and the meanings they have given. As the core of interview research is an interest in other people’s stories (Seidman, 2006), the research methods related to participation, observation, and narrative helped better understand the evolution of social resilience in China (especially in Sichuan) after the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008.

Over the past two years, the research team, which consists of cross-strait scholars, has taken advantage of exchange visits and arranged for meetings and field studies in the earthquake-affected area. Qualitative data were collected through a snowballing approach. After being introduced to an officer in the Department of Emergency Management in Chengdu City, Sichuan Province, and based on the recommendation of scholars in the university, the research team contacted participants involved in the relief or recovery efforts following the Wenchuan earthquake as well as scholars in the field of disaster management.

Participants in the focus group discussion and in-depth interview respondents included two main targets: practitioners, who are the main persons or directors of social organizations, and scholars and researchers from universities in the public administration and disaster management fields. In order to analyze issues from different angles and include more perspectives from respondents outside of Sichuan Province, this study also conducted interviews in Beijing and Shanghai. These meetings were recorded, with the participants’ permission. Although no government officials agreed to participate in interviews due to the sensitive nature of socio-government interactions, with their help, the research team was able to participate in and observe the district government emergency management working forum organized by the municipal government. Table 1 presents the information about focus groups and in-depth interviews.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. Adjustments to government emergency management since 2008: Toward more effective internal coordination and communication

Article 3 of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Incident Responses defines “emergency events” as natural disasters, major accidents, public health incidents, and social security incidents that occur suddenly, cause or may seriously endanger society, and require emergency measures to deal with the situation. In addition to the classification of the severity of disasters and the hierarchy of vertical systems, the law authorizes horizontal response departments to deal with different types of disasters. The law and administrative regulations stipulate that the relevant departments of the State Council are responsible for responding to emergencies. Different interviewees pointed out that the horizontal design of this disaster-based approach caused challenges in terms of communication and coordination. The literature also pointed out that the mechanical disaster prevention and the design of the focus exclusively on the efficiency of the system members to complete the work create a drawback in this design, making it difficult to respond quickly to environmental or sudden changes (Chang, 2016; Hatch, 1997; Jan, 2004).
One of the most challenging topics in disaster management is the coordination and communication between different communities and organizations. One interviewee mentioned:

From the academic point of view, it may be better to establish a more comprehensive system instead of the single-hazard system, which may result in some problems, such as a lack of information sharing and communication between the different governmental agencies. If something happens today, maybe they do not know how to communicate effectively. (Interviewee C)

Another explained:

There is always a coordination problem between the departments and departments within the government, and then there is also coordination problems among the government, enterprises, and the NGOs in emergency management. (Interviewee H)

The Ministry of Emergency Management was established to coordinate emergency management and comprehensive disaster management, standardize and integrate social rescue forces, facilitate the connection between social organizations and the government, and enhance the synergy between government and social organizations (Gao and Liu, 2018; Wang, 2018). These functions can be examined in three aspects. First, the ministry accelerates the construction of social forces to participate in the disaster relief platform. For example, in March 2019, the social emergency force participated in the online application system for disaster relief. It was officially put into operation to realize the functions of online registration and reviews of social emergency forces, disaster information releases, rescue applications, and rescue management. Second, the ministry coordinates some policy issues that forces, disaster information releases, rescue applications, and rescue management. Third, the ministry improves social organizations’ ability to participate in disaster relief. For example, in June 2018, the Ministry of Emergency Management held the first professional training of social forces that participate in disaster relief work; six months later, in December, it launched the first national social emergency strength skill competition.

In addition to the integration of government departments, it is important to know how to implement emergency management into community governance—a task facing China’s emergency management system reforms in the past decade. One interviewee stated:

Now we have a community grid management system in each district—that is, we are divided into this unit grid in this urban area. If some problem occurs in this unit grid, it will be systematic and immediately mobilize specific forces to the rescue. (Interviewee H)

The research team also participated in the district government emergency management working forum organized by the Chengdu Emergency Management Office, during which it acquired a better understanding of the emergency work from the perspectives of government and community safety and the setting up and operation of the community micro fire station. Furthermore, the data indicate that the current Chinese emergency management system has focused more on the importance of community risk awareness and capacity building.

### 4.2. Government’s closer interaction with society in emergency Management: Trust and social cohesion

After the Wenchuan earthquake, the number of social organizations involved in disaster emergency rescue and the amount of disaster relief funds invested in China continued to grow, and the rescue areas and rescue methods involved showed diversified development. Meanwhile, the legal system’s emergency mode relied on the Emergency Response Law as the main body and emergency response plan system at all levels. Yet disaster coordination governance continued to face challenges from the government, the light society, the inefficient operations of resource integration and emergency management, the insufficient cultivation of specialized teams, and inadequate support measures for social forces and participation (Jin, 2004; Zhou and Liu, 2015). To this end, the

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**Table 1**

| Code | Organization | Interviewees | Time/Location | Form |
|------|--------------|--------------|---------------|------|
| A    | Sichuan Cooperation Public Welfare Development Center | Project manager OOO | January 11, 2016 | Focus Group |
| B    | Sichuan Yibu Public Welfare organization | Project manager OOO | January 11, 2016 | Focus Group |
| C    | Sichuan University Post-Disaster Reconstruction and Management College | Associate Professor OOO | August 16, 2016 | In-depth Interviews |
| D    | Sichuan University Post-Disaster Reconstruction and Management College | Director OOO | August 17, 2016 | Focus Group |
| E    | Chengdu OO Community Development Center | Deputy Director OOO | August 17, 2016 | Focus Group |
| F    | Chengdu OO Community Development Center | Project Manager OOO | August 17, 2016 | Focus Group |
| G    | Sichuan University Disaster Society | Researcher | September 22, 2016 | In-depth Interviews |
| H    | Shanghai Jiaotong University | Professor OOO | January 4, 2017 | In-depth Interviews |
| I    | Chengdu OO Social organizations | Director OOO | January 6, 2017 | In-depth Interviews |
| J    | Sichuan University | Associate Professor OOO | January 10, 2017 | In-depth Interviews |
| K    | Chengdu OO | Captain OOO | August 31, 2017 | In-depth Interviews |
| L    | Chengdu OO Volunteer Corps | Captain (President) OOO | July 26, 2018 | In-depth Interviews |

Source: Authors.
Chinese government has focused on improving the laws and regulations, policy planning, and behavioral norms of social forces participating in disaster relief. Its main content involves the role of market and social forces in disaster prevention, mitigation, and relief.

These environmental traits can easily impact the routine operation procedures and decision-making processes of government agencies. In the past, administrative organizations emphasized the development of stability, rationality, and linearity. However, under the advent of the risk society, the concepts of chaos and non-linearity continually impact the thoughts of the traditional public sector. The factors that impact social resilience include trust and social cohesion as well as a sense of community (Enemark, 2006; Poynting, 2006). The interviewees pointed out how these factors affected efforts during the Wenchuan earthquake and subsequent recovery phases. One interviewee provided a vivid example:

A few years ago, I went to several communities and started promoting the idea. Some local representatives said, “We want to do disaster prevention and reduction...to save your time, we can have a simple plan, and everyone just follow the guidelines of this plan.” I came up with a question that took him a while to figure out the answer. I asked him, “If a real disaster hit the area, do you think people around the area would still follow the plan easily?” (Interviewee A)

Other interviewees mentioned cases about accumulating trust between government and social organizations and between social organizations and community citizens:

For example, we need to report to the school and the Education Bureau whom we invite to participate in the program. In other words, social organizations must first form a trusting relationship with the government. (Interviewee G)

For ourselves, we need to grasp the characteristics, principles, and norms of being social organizations. We are partners of the government. You will find that the government needs some time and space to slowly feel and understand social organizations for a better collaboration. (Interviewee E)

We started to do post-disaster services after the rescue phase. We build relationships with the villagers through a large number of activities, and we need to promote residents’ autonomy and some things within the community (community awareness) and discover community leaders and community cadres. (Interviewee F)

In addition to trust, the interviewee from academia mentioned that the sense of community and cohesion also play important roles:

The community in Western society usually has some grassroots or civil organizations self-organized by the community residents. However, the community in China I observed was very different from the West in substance and structure... In China, currently the idea of “community” cannot be treated as a unit alone because the public’s awareness of the community is still very weak. (Interviewee J)

In other words, social resilience involves a common reaction of all social entities, so it is important for the government to increase its trust in NGOs and strengthen community awareness.

As Kooiman (1993) pointed out, there is no single actor in the policy implementation process that can have enough knowledge to deal with the increasingly complex issues. Therefore, governing future disasters requires the cooperation of the public and private sectors to form different networks, share responsibilities, and engage in mutual granting power and capacity in order to achieve the best policy results. As one interviewee stated:

Especially after the Ya-An earthquake, similar disasters were very stimulating to social organizations, and social organizations were becoming more and more professional. Their professional courses were approved by the government. Once the government’s trust in social organizations is raised, they find that this mutual cooperation will benefit all social organizations, governments, and the general public. (Interviewee A)

In order to form common goals, accumulate and exert more energy in disaster management, and effectively reduce the casualties caused by disasters, the self-organization mode in community and social organizations warrants more attention in the future.

4.3. Social resilience after the Sichuan Earthquake: the role of government and social organizations and the building of a collaborative mechanism

An emergency regulatory system refers to a mechanism built on methods and measures of the emergency management process. In some of China’s government documents, the word regulatory is replaced by mechanism (Wang et al., 2016), suggesting that the trend of emergency management system design among authorities is to pursue collaboration. According to the interviewee from Beijing:

In fact, the government’s role is constantly being revised. With the development of society, this is inevitable... After 2008, non-governmental organizations were eager to grow because of the Wenchuan earthquake. Within six months, these civil organizations were fully recognized. The government acknowledged that civil organizations can help solve many problems with high efficiency and good quality. Since then, the importance of the rescue organization has been known, and various support policies have gradually emerged. (Interviewee L)

The relationship between NGOs and the government varies in different situations (Coston, 1998; Najam, 2000; Young, 1999, 2000). Interviewee A pointed out that relationships with the government are also very subtle:

In fact, the death rate of social organizations in China is very high because they can neither be separated from the government nor is it legal to leave the government. However, being too close to the government means that civil organizations must adapt to the government style of management, which limits civil organizations’ openness—that is to say, they cannot find their position and may become temporary workers for the government.

In recent years, a mechanism has gradually emerged during interactions between the government and social organizations that clearly stipulates the participation forms and legal guarantees of relevant units during disaster responses and establishes social public safety knowledge and participation in emergency drills. For example, in October 2015, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued the “Guiding Opinions on Supporting and Guiding Social Forces to Participate in Disaster Relief Work” (关于支持引导社会力量参与救灾工作的指导意见). This publication marked the first time that various social forces, including civil emergency relief organizations, were involved in disaster relief work within the government’s normative system. On March 16, 2016, the National People’s Congress passed the Charity Law, and the Voluntary Service Regulations were promulgated on August 22, 2017, which clearly stipulate that:

when emergency incidents such as major natural disasters, accident disasters and public health events occur, it is necessary to promptly carry out rescue assistance, [and] the government should establish a coordination mechanism, provide the necessary information, and guide fundraising and rescue activities in a timely and orderly manner.

The “Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Promoting the Reform of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation and Relief System” (中共中央国务院关于推进防灾减灾救灾体制机制改革的意见), issued on December 19, 2016, concluded that a sound social force participation mechanism is an important part of reforms of the mechanism for disaster prevention, mitigation, and relief and should encourage the full
participation of social forces. The work of normal disaster reduction, emergency rescue, transitional resettlement, and restoration and reconstruction, among other efforts, requires multi-participatory social disaster prevention, mitigation, and relief patterns. The National Comprehensive Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Plan (2016–2020) also clearly defined social emergency forces, such as volunteer emergency rescue teams.

In the current development of communities in mainland China, individual community committees play an important role in mobilizing and integrating various types of community resources as part of their self-governance, which is a process of reducing conflicts, promoting cooperation, and enhancing the power and reputation of their own communities (Liu, 2015). As a traditional administrative organization, the community committee replaced the unit system and has become an important link for the country and society. During the diversified and rapid development of modern cities, especially as traditional mobilization organizations and administrative control methods are losing their legitimacy, re-mobilizing and absorbing the people to return to the ruling network of the CCP system have become urgent goals of the current reforms of mainland China (Chen, 2011). The interviewee from the volunteer organization emphasized the role of being a “supporter” of the government:

There are specialists in every community, and their working experience may not be as much as our civil society. So we have to help them. When the government organizes large events, we, the civil organizations, will and should participate and provide the necessary assistance. (Interviewee K)

Finally, community committees have also become more closely linked with the political party and the government; this link is rooted in the work of the CPC’s party-building efforts. Therefore, the interviewees perceived community committees as not having purely civil roles in disaster prevention and relief. On the other hand, non-governmental social organizations and communities are more oriented toward network-based development in disaster prevention and rescue issues. During the focus group discussion, social organizations’ party-building work also attracted the authors’ attention. Interviewees pointed out that such work facilitated a closer relationship, thereby helping the party and the social organizations work together.

5. Conclusion

Under the Chinese political system, research in recent years has focused on how to ensure that the government and society engage in better interactions and enjoy more effective cooperation. Such developments in the decade following the Wenchuan earthquake have attracted more discussion from scholars and experts in the field of emergency management. The relationship between the Chinese government and its society has consistently maintained the conditions of emergency management. The relationship between the Chinese government and its society has consistently maintained the conditions of emergency management. The relationship between the Chinese government and its society has consistently maintained the conditions of emergency management. The relationship between the Chinese government and its society has consistently maintained the conditions of emergency management. 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Second, although the Chinese government has recognized the important role and function of social organizations in the development of social resilience in emergency management, the development of trust between the government and social organizations has still been a slow process under the current Chinese government system. The accumulation of social capital remains weak, which is detrimental to the construction and development of social resilience. In other words, more interaction, communication, understanding, and dialogue between the government and the social groups are necessary in the future.

Finally, in recent years, relevant laws and regulations to promote the synergy mechanism have also been promulgated; the impact of such efforts on social resilience is a subject worthy of further observation. Yet the elements of social resilience involve creativity in addition to resistance and recovery. The main source of this creativity is the self-organization of the community, which the authors believe is currently missing in China’s disaster management system. In other words, it would be helpful if the Chinese government could give moderately more space for civil society participation, making it more likely to include creative approaches in disaster management.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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