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Lessons from Sichuan for Haitian Survivors

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By Sascha Matuszak

[China has just sent its second medical team to Haiti](#), along with 20 tons of supplies and five Chinese peacekeepers to replace the four who died in the earthquake that destroyed Port-au-Prince on January 12th. The current group replaces a set of Chinese International Search and Rescue workers and sniffer dogs who arrived in Haiti the day after the disaster struck.

In a [Beijing News editorial](#) on January 15th, Shi Jia, [a Beijing-based scholar](#), writes that the quick Chinese response to Haiti's earthquake has to do with empathy and the fact that just over a year ago, Sichuan went through the same experience. In the *China Daily*, the devastation in Haiti was [front page news](#) and an editorial reiterated Shi Jia's point:

The suffering of people anywhere in the world strikes a chord in the hearts of Chinese people. The death of four Chinese peacekeepers in Haiti has little to do with it. Chinese people feel a special sympathy for Haitians because just less than 20 months ago they were struggling to rise from the debris of one of the biggest quakes in human history.

It is noteworthy that the official Chinese media has refused to compare the logistical nightmare that Haitians are experiencing with the amazing efficiency of the Chinese state back in May 2008. In the U.S., much of the discussion surrounds the deep infrastructural and economic problems that have exacerbated the tragedy in Haiti and made for some very gruesome photo-ops: corpses piling in the streets, people looting and an atmosphere of general chaos and despair.

Taking this into account, comparisons with the quake in Sichuan that killed at least 80,000 people will find that, although the tragedy here in Sichuan was horrific and scarred the region forever, what is happening today in Haiti might prove to be even more devastating. The nearest big city to the Beichuan earthquake, Chengdu, is a provincial capital that escaped most of the damage; in contrast, the earthquake in Haiti destroyed the capital, decapitated the government, and killed the top UN officials in country at the time. The city of Chengdu was able to provide a large and capable base of operations for the domestic relief efforts (blood drives, water drives, clothes drives etc.) and the international aid and media organizations that poured in from all over the world. Places like the Bookworm Cafe in Chengdu provided couches, Internet access and hot coffee for dozens of different operations. In Haiti, by contrast, organizations have had to set up facilities in whatever surviving structures they can find—even the airport.

People arriving in Haiti may feel as though they are entering a war zone, as they see U.S. Marines unloading gear and hear helicopters hovering over head. [In this New York Times article](#), written five days after the quake, the frustration of aid workers from around the world is palpable:

"There are 200 flights going in and out every day, which is an incredible amount for a country like Haiti," said Jarry Emmanuel, the air logistics officer for the agency's Haiti effort. "But most of those flights are for the United States military." He added: "Their priorities are to secure the country. Ours are to feed. We have got to get those priorities in sync."

My memory of the situation in China in 2008 is very different. In the wake of the disaster, China didn't require quite as much synchronization. The country was secure. There was very little looting or violence in Sichuan after the quake, and the nation responded at once and as one to provide monetary aid and manpower to clear roads, re-build bridges and establish a systematic relief program that kept frustration and death at bay. One day after the earthquake in Sichuan I was able to access the roads to Qing Cheng Mountain, just outside of Dujiangyan. This region was devastated by the quake: houses were flattened and boulders the size of semi-trucks had slid down the hillsides and buried entire communities. Nevertheless, people had cell phone coverage, water, tents and food, and volunteers were already streaming into the hills looking for something to do.

Haiti, by contrast, was a poor, corrupt country that was barely able to stand on its own two feet without the UN at its elbow and was beset by many problems before this quake even hit. In terms of infrastructure, Haiti is widely considered on par with Somalia — an assessment tragically confirmed by images of bulldozers piling the bodies of earthquake victims into dump trucks.

It is important to note that Beichuan and the rest of northern Sichuan were and for the most part still are under-developed and poor parts of China. So, in 2008 as well, the epicenter of the quake was a backward, poverty-stricken region with corrupt local officials, who had been cashing in on infrastructure funds meant to develop the area — not much different than Haiti, in some respects.

The tragic scandal of decrepit engineering and shoddy materials is still seething in Sichuan as couples mourn the children who died at their school desks and attempt to move on with their lives. China is not a First World Country, no matter what the economic growth rates tell us, and regions like northern Sichuan are prime examples of the eddies of poverty that exist even after waves of progress have washed over the country.

On January 14th, David Brooks [commented on the ills of Haiti](#) and attributed them to a combination of “too much aid,” historical oppression and culture:

We’re all supposed to politely respect each other’s cultures. But some cultures are more progress-resistant than others, and a horrible tragedy was just exacerbated by one of them.

He ends his essay by calling for a “Huntington-esque” cultural revolution in Haiti that would help turn poverty and hopelessness into affluence much better than any aid could. The overwhelming influence of culture is an easy assumption to make, given the prevailing attitudes about China’s culture (united, industrious, obedient) and the response to the earthquake in Sichuan as a basis for comparison. Brooks, however, knows very little about northern Sichuan and how poor and uneducated the region is; clearly, culture did not save these people when the earthquake struck.

It might be more productive to see what China actually did and is still doing to repair the damage of the 2008 earthquake. Sichuan and Haiti have deadly earthquakes in common and the experiences of the one can definitely inform the decision of the other. With most natural disasters, [logistics, or the lack thereof](#), tends to be the biggest factor in reducing the damage and death of a natural disaster.

In China, the quake was pragmatically viewed by some as a chance to re-build the region from scratch with central government (and private) funds and a clear and unambiguous program of reconstruction supervised by authorities in Chengdu and Beijing. These authorities organized meetings with city planners from around the world in order to devise a plan that would not only repair the logistical net that was destroyed, but strengthen it as well.

In the weeks after the quake the central government assigned each province in China to an affected region in Sichuan. Construction workers from Anhui, Shandong, Shanxi and Guizhou were building temporary homes, roads, latrines, bridges and other needful things within two weeks of the earthquake.

China aimed then (and still aims now) to re-vamp the entire region with a top-down approach of heavy spending and heavy building, and Beichuan and Dujiangyan have Beijing and Chengdu to rely on. A project underway right now involves linking Gansu, Shanxi and Sichuan Provinces through a highway network built in the very mountains that shook like leaves in 2008. The idea is simple: enable the free movement of people and goods and the economy will flourish, the community will be strengthened and future disasters will not take as heavy a toll as they would have with less infrastructure in place.

One thing to look for in the months ahead is how Haiti (and the world) responds to the glaring inadequacies of the Haitian infrastructure and government. Will Haiti be rebuilt stronger than before? Will the Haitian people unite under a banner of common suffering, or tear each other apart in order to survive? Will the international community spend billions to build a massive port in Port-au-Prince and

a six-lane highway linking the port to the hinterland and then leave the locals to figure it all out, [like they did in Bali](#)?

Reconstruction and aid are complex issues and are susceptible to graft, infighting and mixed solutions with mixed results. What we can learn from the Chengdu earthquake is that a solid base with the mandate and a long term plan seems to work well in getting a region back on its feet and running again. [This essay here](#), by Chen Rong for *The China Daily*, argues that a base of operations and a determined government make all the difference.

The key is that Beijing and Sichuan saw a chance to improve a part of the country that, although a vital part of China's long-term development, had yet to enjoy the fruits of the nation's economic rise.

Port-au-Prince should be regarded as providing a similar opportunity to fix what has been broken for far too long.

Sascha Matuszak is a Chengdu-based writer — read more of his work at Chengduliving.com.

Tags: [2008 Earthquake](#)