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A Qiang Perspective on Promoting the Rehabilitation of Children Affected by the Earthquake

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Abstract

The Qiang ethnic minority had a population of around 300,000 at the time of the earthquake. The Qiang mostly inhabit the poorest and most socially disadvantaged remote rural mountainous areas of the Wen Chuan and Mao Wen Qiang Autonomous Counties of Sichuan. The Qiang have a continuous cultural history dating from the Diqiang groups of the Xia Dynasty (16th to 11th century BC). They have their own language and animistic belief system, and have developed their own traditional ways of dealing with disasters. The Qiang's myth of "Bubita" (God) and the legend of "Mutazhu and Douanzhu" (a heroic story) are key messages in understanding disasters; the village "Duyaomao" (poisonous cat, meaning witch) is important for explaining children's illness and health. The rites conducted by the Shibi (cultural leader) are the core activity in advocating collective action for responding to disaster. To reach out quickly to children who have been affected by their traumatic experiences, many volunteers have given their assistance, including doctors, psychologists, counselling staff and social workers. In particular, a large-scale program of psychiatric counselling/therapies administered by the government is being carried out. However, employing psychological counselling and psychiatric therapies from the western individualistic perspective has led to a dilemma for public health based on medical/psychological agendas. Widespread evidence has also shown that there is a very limited effect from outside community visitors, whose one-off, inconsistent, non-indigenous messages do not carry over into the children's everyday lives. The need for an indigenous approach is stressed.

Before we could plan an appropriate rehabilitation program to help the children affected by the earthquake, it was important to learn what features of the Qiang culture would be supportive and what methods would not be acceptable. This paper describes some of those aspects which were important from the Qiang perspective.

The Qiang ethnic minority is one of the many ethnic minorities of Sichuan Province, the largest Province which covers a widespread area of China's South West. The Qiang ethnic minority had a population of around 300,000 at the time of the earthquake. The Qiang inhabit the poorest and most socially disadvantaged remote rural mountainous areas of the Wen Chuan, Mao Xian, Li Xian and Bei Chuan Autonomous Prefecture (CDO, 2008).

Our work was concentrated on Wen Chuan and Mao Xian and surrounding villages. Li Xian was totally demolished in the earthquake. In this harsh environment the villagers grow fruit and vegetables and keep pigs and goats which scavenge for grass under the eye of a villager. The diet is mainly vegetarian, supplemented by dried pork with much fat. The traditional clothing is still worn, especially by the women.

Traditional housing was built around the forts which were built to repel attack and was built into the side of the mountain. A clever water reticulation system was a feature. Many young people who lived in these traditional group homes have left for better employment in the towns and cities. These old style villages were badly hit in the earthquake. A "fort" tower is now being built in the new villages but has little of its old significance.

The Qiang people call themselves Erma, meaning Aborigines. They have a long cultural history, with origins in the early Shu Period supported by archaeological evidence discovered at Sanxingdui (China Travel and Tourism Press, 2009) and more recently in and around Chengdu. They have a well documented continuous

cultural history dating from the Diqiang and Danxian groups of the Xia Dynasty (16th to 11th century B.C.). The Qiang also appear in the historical novel “The Three Kingdoms” (Attributed to Luo Guanzhong, trans. by Roberts, M., 1944), set in the period of the early third century, A.D.

In the history of the Qiang, over two thousand years the Qiang have had much experience of suffering various natural disasters related to their lives in the disadvantaged geological region and the mountainous environment. The cultural response to various disasters is therefore a core theme in their oral narrative history. That history is not written down but embedded in Qiang myth stories, presented by the Shi Bi, the cultural leaders, in classic historical narratives, in the form of social representations and cultural metaphors (Chai, 2009; Chai & Yang, 2010).

Because of the severe devastation, the initial response to reconstruction has been urgent building construction to provide some temporary shelter for those who lost their homes. Temporary accommodation in group halls and canvas tents has been provided for the many children who have no parents or families or whose families could not be found. Of necessity, this work has been carried out by construction workers from cities such as Chengdu by Han people, who have little knowledge of the Han people’s culture.

To reach out quickly to children who have been affected by their traumatic experiences, many volunteers have given their assistance, including medical doctors, psychologists, counselling staff and social workers. As with the building reconstruction workers, these helpers are mostly Han people who have little knowledge of the Qiang people’s culture and are therefore unable to provide a culturally appropriate sustainable program of assistance. The kind of professional support which has been identified (CACCCS, 2008) as the most needed is one which will continue into the mid to longer term and will address the children’s psychological and social needs in a coordinated program. Most of the volunteers’ activities have been hastily put together, with short visits, drawing on many disciplines, with little coordination, resulting in much overlapping among the volunteers’ activities. The children did not have any continuity with their therapists or advisers because they were being moved from one temporary placement to another. Most temporary accommodation was away from their home districts.

The official plan was to bring the children back to their home environment after a short transitional term of about six months in outside communities, while schools and other accommodation were built. There were between 30,000 to 40,000 such children (Yang Xian Gui, Director of Qiang Ethnic Affairs). Most would come back to the major centres of Wen Chuan, Mao Xian and Bei Chuan.

Although schooling is universal for Qiang children and children are taught in the Chinese language, the Qiang retain the use of their own Qiang language in family and village situations. They have their own traditional belief system, and have developed their own traditional ways of dealing with disasters and illness.

Traditional response to disasters. The rites conducted by the Shi Bi (the cultural leader) are the core activity in advocating collective action for responding to disasters. In the case of a disaster, such as the recent earthquake, the Shi Bi passes on the message using the traditional interpretation of the cause of the disaster through the vehicle of the legendary story. Chai explains (Chai, 2009, personal communication) that the cultural leader leads by calling together community representatives, and advocates the right interpretation of the cause. The Qiang’s myth of “Bubita” and the legend of “Mutazhu and Douanzhu”, is a key message in understanding the cause of the earthquake. The legend of “Mutazhu and Douanzhu” describes the heroic story of the daughter of a God, who came to earth and met an earthly hero, thus displeasing her father, and causing the God to show his displeasure by causing disaster. According to the legend, the God punishes the people by bringing down three kinds of disasters upon them: forest fires, flooding from melting snows leading to epidemics of illness, and earthquakes. The village “Duyaomao” (meaning witch) is important for explaining children’s illness and health.

The cultural leader passes on “advice” from the daughter on how to handle the disaster. The rituals include prayers, traditional dances, and medications for the epidemics. The two principal cultural leaders from a group of villages bring other group leaders together to receive the advice, then young community members are given the task of conveying the messages to the others. In a group discussion with Shuguang Wang and

Daphne Keats, Chai and Yang (2010) pointed out that the cultural leader also passed on messages about rules of moral and filial behaviour in children. Qiang Leaders have expressed concerns that the children of to-day are more often influenced by the media, TV and computer games. The parents are worried about this but have to accept it.

When asked about the possible conflict between traditional and scientific interpretations of the earthquake, both Chai and Wang agreed that there was no attempt to deal with this question in the schools. It was evident that in the collectivist, oral culture of the Qiang communities it was essential that the context of the children's culture must be taken into account in any program aiming to facilitate the children's rehabilitation in their own Qiang environment.

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