Mr. Hessler, the Internet connection has been broken for 30 hours, I just opened my email, thanks very much for writing to me. I am sorry to say my parents’ house collapsed, but they are fine, when the earthquake happened, they were working in the field, but my niece was badly wounded when she was at school. My parents are with me in the city center. We are busy going to and coming back to hospitals to see our relatives. My house is full of people, my uncles, my aunts, and many other. I am too busy to write, I will let you know more when I am free. Thanks.

David

At my home in Colorado, I received David’s e-mail early Tuesday morning, as the news about the earthquake in southwestern China worsened. As of now, the official death count is more than thirteen thousand, and that number will undoubtedly rise in coming days. I hope that I continue to hear from friends who are safe. David was a student of mine in the mid-nineteen-nineties, when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Sichuan province; that was the English name he had chosen for himself. Like most of my students, he had grown up in the countryside. Many of the e-mails I’m now receiving indicate that people in rural settlements have generally fared better than city residents. A young man named Willy described his wife’s village in northern Sichuan:

In Nancy’s home town . . . their parents were dealing with the newly picked tea and they found the house shake, and they ran out of the room, and the tiles fell off, the windows shook hard, and the water in the jars in their yard jumped out of the jar. People found it very hard to stand and many of them just took hold of the trees to keep balance.

But the truth is that nowadays rural Chinese villages are home mostly to the very old and the very young. Virtually everybody of working age has migrated, and the population of urban centers has exploded—the National Bureau of Statistics estimates that a hundred and thirty million rural Chinese are now living in cities. Construction is fast and often slapdash; during a recent visit to Lishui, a city in Zhejiang province, I was told by workers that it generally takes fifty days to build a two-story factory. This is the kind of structure that has collapsed in cities such as Mianyang, which is close to the epicenter of the quake. A former student named Lucy wrote:
We are really sad to see China is experiencing so many bad things. . . . I called one of my friends in Mianyang, and she told me the things there are very bad. Many people are under the broken buildings. Many students are crying for help. Many children are also crying because they have not eaten anything for 28 hours. Today, when I called her again, I could not reach her. I really hope all the things will be better soon.

In the minds of many Chinese, major earthquakes are often connected with political events. This week’s disaster is the largest since 1976, when a quake in eastern China killed more than two hundred and forty thousand people. That was the year that Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong both died, and the Cultural Revolution ended. At that time, Willy was a newborn in rural Sichuan, far from the epicenter, but even there his parents felt the tremors. His mother was bathing her two sons and her first instinct was to put some clothes on them—later, she said that she couldn’t stand the thought of them dying naked. In a neighboring village, the peasants slaughtered all the pigs, even the smallest ones; they believed that it was best to enjoy what they had before the world ended.

This week, Willy told me that many people are responding in similar ways to China’s recent string of disasters. First, brutally cold weather in January and February caused major transportation-related delays and deaths and disrupted the Spring Festival holiday; then the protests occurred in Tibet and during the Olympic torch relay overseas; and now the earthquake has devastated parts of Sichuan province. He wrote:

People here are likely to connect it with the Olympics. Almost everyone thinks that this year gives China disasters and it is a bad year. Interesting enough, when the snowstorm occurred, when I was watching TV, I just said for fun to Nancy that the year of 2008 was so bad that possibly an earthquake might happen in China. It seems that my sixth sense is right. And the authorities in Sichuan just predicted that there would be severe drought during the summer.

In China, when bad things happen, they happen in places like Sichuan. The province is landlocked, remote, and rugged; it’s always been heavily populated, and it’s always been poor. When I was in the Peace Corps, Sichuan was home to a hundred and ten million people, a staggering figure: roughly one of every fifty human beings on earth was Sichuanese. Since then, the central government has divided the region into two parts, Sichuan province and Chongqing municipality, but that has done nothing to change the sheer sense of massed humanity. And the recent earthquake is by no means unusual. If you’ve lived in Sichuan, and continue to follow it in the news, you become accustomed to terrible stories—floods and landslides and collapsed bridges. Periodically, I’ll receive an e-mail that stops me cold, such as the one that Kevin sent last May:

I am sorry to tell a bad news. My town is called Yihe in Kaixian County in Chongqing. Two days ago, a big thunder hit my wife’s village school. It killed 7 students and wounded 44 students. It was not my wife’s class. But when the tragedy happened, my wife was teaching her students. . . . I am sorry to tell you about the bad news. These days my wife and I are both sad and scared at home.

The Chinese often believe that human beings are shaped by the land around them. After my time in Sichuan, I came to agree; I had never lived among people who were so tough. The Sichuanese are natural workers, and they dominate construction crews in many parts of China. They are patient and tireless and determined, and they’re famous for pragmatism—Deng Xiaoping came from Sichuan. The people are also surprisingly good-natured and optimistic. Maybe that’s what happens when you’re a survivor, and maybe that also accounts for their sense of humor. On Tuesday, I received another e-mail from Willy:

…a minor quake measure 6.1 occurred again in Chengdu at around 3:00 and I called my friend there, they said when it happened yesterday, the whole house was like a swing. But this afternoon, when I called him, he said many of his colleagues (some teachers) were playing mahjong happily in the wake of the terrible quake…

Do you still remember my uncle, who went to Gansu as the early migrant worker? His son survived the quake. . . . He was a college student in Aba Teachers’ College, which happens to be located in the epicenter. He is going to graduate in July, but he found a job for Yanjing Beer Company, the company asked them to go to Guangxi to get training instead of going back to school to study, so when the quake happened he was on the train to Guangxi not knowing that Yanjing Beer Company had saved his life.

This week, it’s unlikely that there will be much good news coming from China. But the rescue crews will, one hopes, make progress, and there may be reason for some Sichuan-style optimism. First, it seems that the Chinese government has been relatively open about news coverage, and it doesn’t seem to be restricting e-mails and phone calls. Second, the scale of destruction could easily have been worse. The epicenter was near the city of Dujiangyan, which in May of 2001 started construction on a massive hydroelectric dam on the Min River. Big dams are common in
China, and Dujiangyan was one of the nation’s “Ten Key Projects” aimed at producing electricity and better water supplies.

By 2003, there were signs that the government was quietly expanding the project, and silt had begun to accumulate at a second location on the river. Dujiangyan is home to a local irrigation system that has functioned for more than two thousand years and has been declared a World Heritage site; it would have been effectively destroyed by the new dam. The city’s World Heritage Office opposed the project, contacting journalists from Chinese publications. The press was allowed to report with relative openness, in part because it portrayed the dam as destructive of cultural heritage. But one of the local entities that openly opposed the dam was the Dujiangyan Seismological Bureau.

In August of 2003, dam construction was forced to stop. In the history of the People’s Republic, this represented the first time that an engineering project on such a scale had been cancelled because of public pressure. (For a full account, see “Unbuilt Dams,” by Andrew C. Mertha and William R. Lowry, published in the October, 2006, issue of Comparative Politics.) Today, with Dujiangyan in ruins and the government struggling to respond, there’s some small consolation in the fact that at least there wasn’t another major dam on the site. And maybe later, after the emergency has passed, officials will remember the importance of the press and the seismological experts in stopping the dam. Sichuan’s greatest resource has always been its people, and sometimes the government just needs to listen to them.

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