

# WebMemo



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## Seismic Suppression: Chinese Censorship After the Sichuan Earthquake

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Those who thought that the devastating Sichuan earthquake of May 12 brought out the best in the Chinese government should think again.

Six weeks after the quake, it has become obvious that the local government's incompetence and venality was responsible for the collapse of schools while other buildings stood. But now that foreign reporters are covering the deaths of school children and the subsequent angry protests of their parents, Beijing's Central Propaganda Department has reverted to its dictum that the only news fit to print is pro-regime news.<sup>1</sup>

In order to suppress unfavorable news coverage, the Chinese government has adopted a two-pronged approach. First, Beijing has attacked the source of dissent, threatening any grieving parents who persisted in their protests. Second, the government has embarked on an extensive campaign of media censorship. For instance, foreign reporters covering the parents' demonstrations in Sichuan were detained and deported from the towns where the protests took place. *The Los Angeles Times* notes that "web discussion groups have seen postings deleted" magically, as if by some unseen Web umpire.<sup>2</sup> And *The Washington Post* notes that at least one web journalist, Huang Qi, along with two associates, was arrested for posting revealing commentary on the aftermath of the disaster.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, a scholar who wrote about shoddy construction at schools, Zeng Hongling, was charged with, well, who knows what? Ms. Zeng's "crime," said the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, was "to pen a series of firsthand accounts on the earthquake in Mianyang

and send them to a friend, who posted them on the Internet. It's unclear how the police found her, since the essays were posted under a pseudonym."<sup>4</sup>

**The Real Story.** Now that the dust has settled and further crisis has apparently been averted, the real story of China's horrific earthquake shouldn't be how the government managed the crisis but rather:

- How, despite Chinese Communist spin to the contrary, this tragedy was in fact a "manmade" disaster, and
- How many Chinese citizens died because Communist Party and government bureaucrats failed to enforce construction codes in Sichuan Province—known throughout history for its apocalyptic geological upheavals.<sup>5</sup>

**Warning Signs.** On July 27, 1976, the "Tangshan Quake" struck the Tangshan-Tianjin-Beijing megapolis, whose urban centers were characterized by poorly constructed, unreinforced concrete-slab buildings with free-standing brick walls. Approximately 240,000 people (the exact toll has never been revealed) died in the Tangshan Quake; thousands of the dead were coal miners trapped in poorly reinforced underground shafts. Given the role substandard construction played in amplifying

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the Tangshan death toll, Communist Party leaders had clear warning that, in the event of another earthquake, current provincial building designs could result in mass death.

It has been 32 years since the Tangshan temblor, with no intervening Atlantis-scale quakes to remind the Chinese Communist Party why construction codes are useful. Subsequently, the engineering and construction bureaucracy in Sichuan may have—in return for a cash consideration—taken to winking and looking the other way as poorly constructed buildings filled the province.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the current death toll from the Sichuan earthquake continues to climb.

**The Coming Wave.** In the hours and days after the quake, foreign journalists moved with little restriction throughout Sichuan's provincial capital

in Chengdu—only 55 miles from the quake's epicenter—and were allowed into the demolished towns and villages closer to ground zero. These journalists filed the earliest reports documenting the bitterness and anger among the Chinese people. One citizen declared: "This is not a natural disaster—this is done by humans."<sup>7</sup>

Although much of the Chinese people's initial anger may have been defused by a combination of government relief efforts, Premier Wen Jiabao's physical presence at the site of the quake and a crackdown on protests, there are indications that the Communist Party should be ready for a new wave of accusations and recriminations from the survivors and relatives of the more than 80,000 dead.

There are varying opinions among the relatives of the dead as to who is to blame for the current loss of

1. As of June 25, 2008, Vice Premier Hui Liangyu has placed the death toll as high as 80,000. See "China quake death toll to 'exceed 80,000,'" CNN, June 25, 2008, at <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/06/24/quake.toll/index.html> (June 25, 2008). Chinese state media reported May 24 that of the 65,000 dead, 6,581 were children and teachers in collapsed schools. See Ben Blanchard, "China tries to shift focus away from school collapses," Reuters, May 26, 2008, at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/UKNews1/idUKPEK16279720080526> (June 25, 2008). That figure did not include 1,272 missing and 1,107 known buried but not recovered. See "9,000 children, teachers dead or missing in China quake," Agence France-Presse, May 24, 2008, at <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/world/view/20080524-138552/9000-children-teachers-dead-or-missing-in-China-quake> (June 25, 2008). *The Washington Post* estimates that the toll of around 10,000 is a reasonable estimate. See Editorial, "Return to Repression, China muzzles journalists who asked too many questions after the recent earthquake," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2008, p. A14, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/22/AR2008062201586.html>, Edward Wong, "Chinese Parents Call Off Quake Memorial After Official Warning," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2008, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/13/world/asia/13quake.html> (June 25, 2008), Michael Bristow, "China reins in quake school fury," BBC News, June 3, 2008, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/asia-pacific/7434054.stm> (June 25, 2008), and Lindsay Beck, "China quake parents unbowed in pressing complaints," Reuters, June 4, 2008, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSWRI74404620080604> (June 25, 2008).
2. Mark Magnier, "China tightens media limits loosened after earthquake," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 5, 2008, at <http://www.latimes.com/news/print/edition/front/la-fg-rollback5-2008jun05,0,4679706.story> (June 25, 2008).
3. Editorial, "Return to Repression," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2008, p. A14, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/22/AR2008062201586.html> (June 25, 2008); "Human Rights Defender Huang Qi Disappear, Feared Detained by Police," *Chinese Human Rights Defenders Blog*, June 12, 2008, at [http://crd-net.org/Article/Class9/Class15/200806/20080613061417\\_9005.html](http://crd-net.org/Article/Class9/Class15/200806/20080613061417_9005.html) (June 25, 2008).
4. Editorial, "Postquake Crackdown," *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2008, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121330380304369211.html> (June 25, 2008).
5. There were ten quakes registering 7.0 or above on the Richter scale in western China between 1917 and 1950, five of them within 500 miles of the May 12 quake in the decade between 1917 and 1927. The last quake of this scale in Sichuan was in the 1930s. For a complete list, see U.S. Geological Survey compilation "Earthquakes with 1,000 or More Deaths since 1900" at [http://earthquake.usgs.gov/regional/world/world\\_deaths.php](http://earthquake.usgs.gov/regional/world/world_deaths.php) (June 25, 2008).
6. For an engineer's-eye view of the impact of the quake on poorly constructed buildings, see the daily blogs at "Global Risk Miyamoto" at <http://www.miyamotointernational.com/Sichuan/index-may18.php> (June 25, 2008).
7. Tania Branigan, "'This is not a natural disaster—this is done by humans': Distress turns to anger as residents of one town blame cost-cutting and poor workmanship for the collapse of several buildings in the quake," *The Guardian*, May 13, 2008 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/may/13/china.naturaldisasters3> (June 25, 2008).

life. Some blame the local governments and claim that the central government was not correctly informed about the situation. These critics also argue that local government leaders are the ones suppressing the media in order to insulate themselves from criticism. In one grieving mother's words, "We blame the local government for this; the central government doesn't know because local media haven't reported what happened."<sup>8</sup>

A century ago, such tactics were known as the "Czar's defense," which protested that "if the Czar only knew what was happening, he wouldn't permit it." Yet, the Central Propaganda Department knows that this defense can only accomplish so much. Even the normally reserved Chinese journalists eventually became critical, taking note of destroyed schools next to intact buildings. These domestic reporters soon leveled accusations against the local government, leading the propaganda ministry to ban reports on school construction as well as protests by parents.<sup>9</sup>

With the Olympics set to begin in Beijing in August, the Chinese government appears to have retained its standard operating procedure of suppressing negative media coverage of manmade disasters. Despite promises to allow free press coverage of the Olympics, based on the government's reaction to the Sichuan quake, any immediate loosening of media restrictions seems unlikely. Any criticism—foreign or domestic—will not be tolerated by the Chinese government, even as the world gathers in its capital.

**Chinese Double-Speak.** Sometimes, one wonders if senior Chinese leaders really believe the words they utter. On February 28, for example,

Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi insisted that, "No one will get arrested because he said that human rights are more important than the Olympics. This is impossible. Ask 10 people from the street to face public security officers and ask them to say 'human rights are more important than the Olympics' 10 times or even 100 times, and I will see which security officer would put him in jail."<sup>10</sup>

Yang's statement came a week after Chinese state prosecutors tried Yang Chunlin, an unemployed factory worker, on charges of "inciting subversion of state power" after he said human rights were more important than the Olympic Games.<sup>11</sup> And it was two weeks before a law professor at Beijing's China University of Political Science, Teng Biao, was warned by four security police, in the words of the *Wall Street Journal*, to "stop writing articles critical of China's human-rights record, particularly with regard to the Olympic Games in Beijing this August. If he continues, they said, he would lose his position at the China University of Political Science and face jail."<sup>12</sup> And just this week, the Reuters news agency reports that Chinese authorities in Kalpin, Xinjiang, have demolished a mosque "for refusing to put up signs supporting this August's Beijing Olympics."<sup>13</sup>

We will know that China is really "opening up," really modernizing, really liberalizing, when the Chinese media get to report on the Communist Party's continued denial of human rights and suppression of dissent.

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8. Tom Mitchell, "Beijing Reins in Quake Coverage," *Financial Times*, June 1, 2008, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7c4d88c8-2fef-11dd-86cc-000077b07658.html> (June 25, 2008).
9. *Ibid.* See also Maureen Fan, "A Thwarted Search for Information, Man Hunting for His Only Child Finds Communist Party Officials Are Focused on Control, Not Aid," *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2008, p. A-11, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/25/AR2008052502686.html> (June 25, 2008).
10. "Freedom to speak is 'extensive' in China, foreign minister asserts," Reuters, February 28, 2008, at <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/02/28/asia/beijing.php> (June 25, 2008).
11. *Ibid.*
12. Geoffrey A. Fowler, "For Chinese Activists, Stakes Are Raised Ahead of the Olympics," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2008; page A8, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120545814995135481.htm> (June 25, 2008).
13. "China demolishes mosque for not supporting Olympics: group," Reuters, June 23, 2008, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/23/AR2008062300219.html> (June 25, 2008).