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**Title** Crossing the river stone by stone:  
Developing an expanded school mental health network in post-quake Sichuan

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**Abstract** This paper chronicles and consolidates my personal experience and professional journey in China in the past one year after the 512 Sichuan earthquake erupted on May 12, 2008. Several summer children projects I helped to organize had evolved into an expanded school mental health network. As I critically reflect on the pertinent issues in developing professional school social work practice in Sichuan, I shall also outline the challenges and opportunities of relief work in China's context, drawing from the systems perspective. Maximizing available local resources and facilitating the natural development of support network seem to be a useful approach in disaster recovery work. Furthermore, the need for professionals, especially outsiders, to be respectful and be culturally sensitive is valuable.

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**Chinese Abstract** 本文记载作者在 512 汶川大地震后一年来与儿童、学生的工作经验。在叙述个人成长与专业学习之余，作者尝试从系统学视角讨论在四川设立学校社会工作的各种机遇和挑战。其中作者发现妥善利用当地资源、拓展社群的自然支持网络、还有尊敬当地情况及文化习俗，都是社工抗震救灾不可忽略的基本原则。 [135 words]

**Key words** Disaster management; Sichuan earthquake; school social work; China; Chinese students; cultural sensitivity; resilience; child well-being; strengths perspective

Sichuan is a naturally picturesque but isolated province surrounded by mountains in southwest China. The name “Sichuan” is an abbreviation of "four circuits of rivers" (si chuan lu [四川路]) (Sichuan 2009). There is a famous adage in Sichuan that relates to rivers: Crossing the river by feeling the stones (mo zhe shi tou guo he [摸着石头过河]). This saying generally implies a need to tread carefully and act with caution in uncertain situations. On May 12, 2008, this scenic and mountainous province was shaken by an earthquake with a magnitude of 8.0 Ms. The reconstruction of Sichuan, in the following months, is an arduous and mammoth task, as if navigating along a rapidly moving river that waits for no one. The need for caution is obvious. For an outsider like me to participate in the recovery and reconstruction phase of post-quake Sichuan, the adage of “crossing the river by feeling the stones” cannot be more apt.

### **Making personal entrances and exits with trepidations**

My father was diagnosed with stomach cancer and passed away at the age of 73, on May 12, 2008 at about 3:38 in the morning, in Singapore, the very same day the deadly earthquake hit Sichuan at 14:18 in the afternoon. However, I was too preoccupied, attending to my father’s funeral in Singapore, to pay much attention to this tragic disaster far away. It was only until after my family had finalized the funeral a week later that I was struck by the impact of the Sichuan earthquake. At around this time, I was about to leave the National University of Singapore to join the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) on July 2, 2008, with the intent to participate in the development of social work in China.

When an international charity, with a focus on child welfare in China, invited me to join their relief work in Sichuan, I immediately agreed. Why wait? I thought. So, I flew into Sichuan, for the first time, on June 4, 2008, to join the relief efforts. Since then, I had already made 12 trips to Sichuan, and spent some 104 days, an average of 9 days per month, in Sichuan, from June 2008 to May 2009. In the past 12 months, I had been involved in many tasks and activities: providing training to medical professionals, psychologists, teachers, and social workers; organizing summer children projects that later developed into a school social work network; initiating a community mental health project using traditional dance form; giving consultation to governmental departments and local universities in Sichuan; and conducting research related to disaster management policy. In this paper, I shall focus on my experience in working with children and students.

Prior to this, I did not have any experience in relief work or disaster management, even though I had been officially certified as an Emergency Officer, since 1994, in Singapore. As an experienced social worker with specialized family therapy training, I drew heavily from the systemic tradition that emphasizes circular causality, in that I see events and relationships as happening within a context and by means of a network of interacting loops (Goldenberg & Goldenberg 2008). Most importantly, systemic perspectives have taught me to appreciate the strengths of individuals, families and

communities, and to be respectful of the contexts and cultures therein. But in a disaster situation like the 512 Sichuan earthquake, what could I do to help? I had trepidations.

In preparation for the first trip in June 2008, I attended a balloon sculpture class and collected different training manuals on psychological first aid and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). I also consulted experts, in Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, and the United States of America, who had experiences in disaster management and trauma counselling, as I anticipated that I would be providing psychotherapeutic training to relief workers or even psychotherapy to earthquake victims and relief workers. But, I was in for a surprise.

### **Keeping away from psychotherapy**

The earthquake that jolted Wenchuan county in Sichuan and the surrounding regions on 12 May claimed almost 70,000 lives, injuring 375,000, and displacing 15 million, (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2008). Many of the victims were school children, as a result of devastation to schools. Close to 14,000 schools in 159 counties in Sichuan province were damaged (China View 2008). According to official estimates, 5,335 students were dead or missing (Xinhua Net 2009). Some 500 students were certified to be handicapped after the earthquake.

Of a whole range of relief workers, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), medical personnel, volunteers, and teachers were generally considered as the four most respected groups, as the arduous relief work unravelled. They diligently carried out their roles and efficiently accomplished impossible tasks in the quake zones in a selfless manner. Many PLA personnel perished when they risked their lives, entering into the quake areas to unblock the lakes that had formed after landslides blocked the rivers. Doctors and nurses, alongside many volunteers and other relief workers, worked round the clock to provide emergency aid to quake victims and attended to individuals, groups, and families. Countless teachers sacrificed their lives to protect their students in this sudden disaster that struck when classes were just about to begin, normally at 2.30pm, after a siesta.

The general public in Sichuan quickly shunned psychologists and psychotherapists within weeks after the earthquake. Their negative reactions were reflected in a popular but crude saying: Be mindful of fire, theft and psychotherapy (fang huo fang dao fang xin li zhi liao [防火、防盗、防心理治疗]). This is probably related to at least two phenomena. First, individuals who had undergone a half-a-day or full-day "counselling" or "psychotherapy" training flocked to the earthquake-affected areas almost immediately. It is not difficult to imagine their inadequacies due to limited training and experience. This was compounded by their brief stay of one to three days, followed by another group of "psychotherapists" and "counselors," arriving without any coordination of services. Villagers, especially children and teenagers, were particularly perturbed by these well-intended efforts, which yielded negative consequences. Another unfortunate occurrence was that trained psychologists from Sichuan and other provinces were seen rushing into the earthquake-affected zones to conduct research. The use of

psychological scales and psychometrics to study PTSD, depression, resilience, etcetera, was necessary but it could have been conducted in a coordinated manner and at a more appropriate time. They might have added to the distress of residents in the disaster areas. This suspicion of psychotherapy and psychology unfortunately overshadowed the possible benefit of psychotherapeutic interventions that had been carried out, as well as the potential contribution of psychotherapy in the long run in post-quake Sichuan. For instance, there was a major concern over the suicides of highly stressed local cadres immediately after the earthquake. Days before the first anniversary of the 512 earthquake, another cadre who had lost his child in the earthquake committed suicide (China View 2009).

The vehement reaction to psychotherapy inevitably raises two contextual issues for me: First, is psychotherapy applicable in a disaster situation in the Chinese context? Second, what can mental health professionals such as psychotherapists and social workers do to offer appropriate services in a disaster situation in China?

### **Social workers: Being new kids on the Chinese block**

In contrast to psychotherapists, social workers were not prominent as the Chinese community knew little about this fledging profession. Social work in China, which was dormant since the early 1950s, was revived in the 1980s and rapidly expanded to more than 200 social work programs (Law & Gu 2008; Yuen-Tsang & Wang 2008). China has probably the largest number of programmes offering social work training at tertiary level after the United States (Xiong & Wang 2002). Nevertheless, social work practice in China has yet to resolve many fundamental problems. Yip (2007), for instance, highlighted the tension between politicization, professionalization and commercialization of social work practice in China. Specifically, there were few employment opportunities for professional social workers as social work jobs were not established in most government organizations and there were few non-government organizations employing social workers. In the rescue phase, the role that social workers could play was limited as they were not drafted into the government's relief plan and work structure. This was further compounded by the fact that residents in Sichuan did not know who social workers were and what they did. Zhang *et al.* (2009) narrated the struggle they had in introducing themselves as social workers to the residents, in a hard hit disaster area, and carefully working their way through to gain the trust of the residents. Wei (2008) highlighted that the lack of resources, particularly finances, was another major problem for social workers in responding promptly.

### **Adding no trouble and no chaos please**

Since arriving in Sichuan on June 4, 2008, I was hesitant in carrying out psychotherapeutic training, let alone interventions, given the negative responses in general. I was hesitant, partly due to my limitations, such as the lack of Sichuan language skills and cultural understanding, especially since many different ethnic

minority groups, particularly the Qiang and Zhuang minorities, lived in Sichuan. I felt it was essential for me, an outsider, to gain more knowledge of the earthquake situation, the responses of the people, as well as to learn more about the Sichuan people and their cultures, before I could be of help. I spent most of the first two weeks understanding the situations in different parts of earthquake smitten Sichuan, through personal contacts and official liaisons related to PolyU. I had the privilege of meeting with representatives of several international organizations such as Save the Children (China Programme) and Médecins Sans Frontières to understand the work that they were doing. I also had the opportunity to meet and discuss with some Sichuan government departments, such as the Department of Civil Affairs, about the needs in the disaster affected areas, with my colleagues from PolyU. I visited several universities to observe the work that they were doing, particularly those services for students who had been relocated from earthquake areas and separated from their families (“Love schools”, ai xin xue xiao [爱心学校]). The site visits to several counties and government welfare facilities provided very useful first-hand information for me to understand the different local responses and varying conditions of different groups immediately after the earthquake.

Through these meetings and visits, I was utterly impressed by the efficiency of the Chinese government in the rescue phase. In comparison, some international organizations were not able to catch up with the pace. Some of these international organizations had to follow standard procedures, which might not be relevant to the Chinese context or in a disaster context. For instance, the way financial resources were allocated required thorough discussion and approval before execution, which resulted in a lapse of time. The situations in post-quake Sichuan were changing daily, partly due to the quick execution of government policy decisions. When one international organization eventually approved the purchase of tents for a particular village, the Chinese government had already started building makeshift housing. There is a famous modern Chinese saying about the fast pace in China: “planning is not quick enough to catch up with the speed of change” (ji hua gen bu shang bian hua [计划跟不上变化]). Actually, the Chinese government was wary of outsiders or helpers who had entered into disaster areas; that they would “add trouble and create chaos” (tian fan tian ruan [添烦、添乱]). I thought that was a very poignant principle to adhere to, for all disaster relief situations. I learned that good intent did not always bring desirable effects or outcomes. It would indeed be unfortunate that relief workers and volunteers actually “added trouble and created chaos” by imposing standards, procedures, processes, and even expert knowledge that was inappropriate or unfamiliar to the local people.

### **Focusing on fun and play with children**

After careful deliberation and consideration of the opportunities available, my abilities and past experience in working with children, youths, and their families, I decided to join my colleagues from PolyU to work in the children’s summer camps, held from June to August 2008. We first conducted orientation and skills training, in conjunction with the Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs Association (Hong Kong), and collaborated with Save the Children (China programme), which provided the hardware, such as space and materials.

PolyU was responsible in recruiting and training volunteers from four local universities, which offered social work education. In all, we engaged 13 local university lecturers and 70 undergraduate and postgraduate students to serve some 1440 children, on a daily basis, in 6 different villages and towns in Sichuan, over a period of two months. The daily activities included games, story telling, dance, art and craft, and so on. As there were few amenities available in the tents and makeshift housing, the activities were popular among the children and youths. These activities also helped to provide respite for parents who were worried about getting employment and rebuilding homes.

We also actively reached out to the parents and the community, such as the local government, hospitals, schools, and other relief units, to understand better the needs and conditions of the children we served.

The volunteers, mostly in their early 20s and social work undergraduates, were keen and eager to put into practice what they had learnt in class. They had to contend with challenging situations such as children who were unruly and uncooperative. When they met children who were having difficulties adjusting after the earthquake, such as having symptoms of post-traumatic stress, for example, nightmares, fear of darkness, and flashbacks, they were not confident in working with them. There was little possibility of them referring these children elsewhere. Their local supervisors, though mostly graduates from a joint Master's of Social Work programme by the PolyU and the eminent Peking University, were only in their late 20s and had little practice experience themselves. They found it challenging in providing adequate guidance and supervision of the volunteers. We, the consultant team from Hong Kong, provided on-site supervision and telephone consultation as frequently as possible. Each volunteer was expected to keep a daily journal of their experience, which was read by their local supervisor and the consultants for supervision purpose. In addition, the volunteers met on a nightly basis, after a day's work, with their local supervisors, to discuss their encounter for the day, generate options, and make necessary changes to the activities for the following day. Feedback from the parents and teachers and the responses of the children indicated that the summer camps had benefited the children. At the end of the camps, during focus group meetings, the volunteers and local supervisors also reported that running the summer camps was a memorable and life changing experience. Below are three excerpts from the journals of some social work students, written towards the end of the summer camps, in late August 2008:

*Since the beginning of the summer camp, I did not feel that we were of particular help to the children. I thought that all we were doing was providing a safe and happy play environment for the children in the earthquake zone. I was surprised that one day a child told me that the most important lesson he had learned was to be polite and listen to what others had to say. His parents, too, thought he had become more polite and better behaved and so on, after joining our activities. I was not certain what a social worker could do in the disaster zones and what made a good social worker. Now I realize that even if I can be a part of a small change in the children I work with, that is meaningful enough for me.*

*[Social work undergraduate student A, male ]*

*I realized that it was not easy to integrate social work theory and practice, reflecting on what we had done in the children summer camps. I felt confused at times. However, in this process, I realized that conceptualizing what we had done was important for my professional growth. I seemed to have been better able to grasp what was social work over this period. I am happy that I have managed to sort out some of my questions through working with the children.*

*[Social work undergraduate student B, female]*

*I had too many wonderful encounters over this short period of time working with the children. I know I am still far from becoming a professional social worker, but this experience working in the summer camp has given me a more realistic view of what social workers can do.*

*[Social work undergraduate student C, male]*

Along the way, we learnt that working with children in Sichuan after the earthquake could be fun and fulfilling, for both the children and their parents, and the workers involved.

From our observations, we also found that other than a few children, who were psychologically affected by the earthquake and might have developed some problems, the majority were able to cope with this mega disaster relatively well, without developing serious psychological symptoms. The resilience and strengths of children in the context of a disaster in China is an area that needs to be explored further. This might be related to the support provided by their parents who, in turn, had been able to cope with the situation relatively well (Proctor *et al.* 2007). It is well established that if children feel that their families are able to protect them and meet their emotional and physical needs, their level of distress is likely to be reduced. That is, the need to strengthen the capacity of families to nurture and support their children cannot be over emphasized (UNICEF 2003). From our experiences, we were able to affirm the usefulness of focusing on activities in working with children in disaster recovery and management (Gaffney 2006; Jabry 2005), as well as the need to look at the developmental contexts of the children (Zhu & Sim, in press). Based on our work in the summer camps and the positive feedback we received from the children, their parents, teachers, and community, we decided to continue working with students, using the systems framework that aims to connect the school, family and community and a multidisciplinary approach, with active engagement and involvement of stakeholders.

### **Connecting the school, family and community**

With four local university partners and potential donors, my colleagues and I visited several disaster stricken sites to explore the setting up of social work stations in October and November 2008. After visiting a dozen schools, we selected four schools that had



been adversely affected in the earthquake, in the Wenchuan and Mianzhu counties of Sichuan. Since the needs were vast, I knew it would not be possible to meet all of them effectively. I was certain that we had to focus on specific groups of students in each school. From our visits, I identified six particular groups: (a) students who had been physically injured or amputated; (b) students who had lost one or both parents during the earthquake; (c) students who had to stay in school during weekdays because they lived far away from home; (d) students who were separated from their homes on a long-term basis, as their schools were destroyed, and relocated to another place in Sichuan; (e) students who experienced psychological and/or behavioural problems after the earthquake; and (f) students who were unsupervised at home after school, as parents had to work. The last group of students was known as “left behind” students (liu shou er tong [留守儿童]) in mainland China, which was a particularly serious problem in rural China, where parents left the villages to work in the city or towns (Ye & Murray 2005; Zhang 2006). This problem was further heightened after the earthquake due to the deaths of parents in some cases, and in most cases, longer working hours of parents in view of their financial difficulties after the earthquake.

Table 1 presents statistics relating to the various target student groups for each of the four schools in the expanded school mental health network. Expanded school mental health (ESMH) looks beyond traditional therapeutic approaches to working with youth and recognizes the need for many different disciplines to collaborate in promoting mental health. While the ESMH framework recognizes the usefulness of traditional modalities to meet certain mental health needs with certain students, the framework places a strong emphasis on prevention programming, positive youth development programming, comprehensive medical/wellness programming, classroom- and school-wide health-promotion and so forth. Our guiding service philosophy is to actively work with and connect the major developmental contexts of the students; these include the school, family and the community.

### **Table 1 about here**

Considering the intense needs of the schools, we employed one social worker for every 500 students. This ratio was higher than that of Hong Kong: one social worker to 1000 students. We employed 8 social workers and 2 rehabilitation therapists. I am thankful that a colleague from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Rehabilitation Sciences, Dr. Kenneth Fong, readily provided consultation to our project. Moreover, the Hong Kong Rehabilitation Society (HKRS) provided on-site supervision to our therapists. This was made possible as the HKRS had received funding from the Hong Kong Government to employ a physiotherapist and an occupational therapist from Hong Kong to work full time in Sichuan after the earthquake. I am also most thankful that we are able to work across disciplines. The social workers continually dialogued with the other professionals, particularly the teachers, therapists, and the school counselor (this position was usually taken up by a teacher who had some training in counseling). Moreover, the social workers were expected to complement the work of existing communist party institutions in the school system, such as the Young Pioneers (Zhong Guo Shao Nian Xian Feng Dui [中国少年先锋队]) and the Communist Youth League of China (Zhong

Guo Gong Chan Zhu Yi Qing Nian Tuan [中国共产主义青年团]). After all, school social work station was not an established and legitimate sub-system in the Chinese school system. School social workers need to tackle this challenge urgently, lest their roles and responsibilities be in conflict with other work units, which would not be helpful in developing school social work in Chinese schools. Social workers must be able to complement the existing institutions and develop innovative services that were currently not available.

Identifying the target student groups in each of the schools helped the social workers to set priorities and allocate resources, given their lack of experience. Nevertheless, working with specific target student population was not without challenges as the roles of social workers were still being defined. For instance, one of the principals specifically instructed the rehabilitation workers not to work within the school compound as the school would not be able to shoulder any responsibility should mishap occur to the students. Such a concern was not unfounded, as parents might react strongly, having just survived a major disaster. We made home visits instead and worked directly with the parents, as an independent entity, without implicating the school. In another school, the students revolted by refusing to eat in the school canteen and boycotted classes, as they were dissatisfied with the way the timetable was arranged. In the same school, there were gang fights among the students in the day, which were followed by a gang fight among the parents, back in their villages in the evening. The police were called in. As we were new in the school, we did not respond immediately as we were not certain what the school management required us to do and what should be our role. We discussed with the principal and found that one of the problems seemed to be a lack of communication between the students, the school, and their parents. We then pioneered a “Little Reporters Scheme”, where 20 students were recruited and trained to report on students’ experiences in school, so as to provide information to parents.

### **Developing social support rather than individual intervention for teachers**

Apart from the students, we actively reached out to the teachers. Given the lack of training and experience of the young social workers, as well as limited supervision, a clear directive was given to all the social workers not to provide counseling to teachers. We also instructed them not to actively take on casework with students, teachers, and their families, other than financial assistance, until they were more confident, at a later stage. However, they were expected to provide basic support through active listening, emphatic responding, accompanying them in times of stress, without having to solve problems or make changes. This proved to be a relief for our workers, too. In place of counseling, psychotherapy and casework, social workers were expected to develop programmes that supported the teachers and students. In one of the schools, for instance, teachers and students were relocated from their hometowns to another school, which was 350 kilometers away, as the original school building had collapsed in the earthquake. This meant that students and teachers were separated from their families since it would take 16 hours to travel to and fro. Teachers had to work around the clock, without any off days. In addition, they were unable to participate in rebuilding their own homes. They

were tired, demoralized and frustrated. The social workers in this school carefully selected volunteers who were fresh graduates from a teacher training college to provide relief teaching, so that the teachers could have a two-week break, in batches, to return home to rest and sort out family matters.

In another school, 20 of 40 teachers perished in the earthquake. The remaining teachers and their families were also adversely affected. Four of the male teachers lost their spouses, of whom two lost their only child as well. The social worker in this school, who was only 22 years old, was not trained to offer therapeutic interventions. Neither would the teachers open up to this young social worker. However, the social worker was able to befriend them through leisure activities and having regular meals together. During the three-week Chinese New Year break in January 2009, these four male teachers found it emotionally difficult to return home or stay behind in school because of their grief and tensions at home. After consulting with them, we found that they did not mind going away on a trip. The social worker and a volunteer then organized a Chinese New Year home visitation trip, followed by a visit to the scenic Yunnan province for two weeks. The purpose of this trip was for the teachers to form a stronger informal support group and to have a breather, which was commonly referred to as “san xin” (distract the heavy heart [散心]). One of the teachers fell ill, early in the trip, and was even hospitalized for several days. He did not take a day of rest since the earthquake, though he had lost both his wife and child in the earthquake. He took to heavy drinking and smoking to help battle insomnia. The trip was a good break away for him. I was touched by a short but heartwarming email that he sent, after the trip, in late February 2009:

*Hi! I am sorry I have not written to you earlier, as I have no access to the Internet over the winter holidays. The trip for the four of us has been delightful. During this trip, we are able to release the hurt that have been pent up since the earthquake. We feel a lot more relaxed now. Thank you for facilitating this trip. Please keep in touch.*

Teacher, 31 years old

Hubble, Duncan and Miller (1999) believed that people often change mainly due to extra-therapeutic elements beyond the therapy room. They also believed that strong therapeutic relationships between workers and service were instrumental in facilitating change. Skills and placebo effects played a part, too, though of a lower significance. In our experience, I learned that the use of extra-therapeutic elements, such as informal social support and life events, could be very powerful in healing and change. Our strong relationships with the teachers were instrumental in facilitating processes that were meaningful and hopefully therapeutic for them in overcoming their emotional pain.

One evening, as I was chatting with the four male teachers, they revealed a fear of losing the memory of the earthquake. They found it more difficult to remember some of the details as time lapses. They were most afraid of forgetting their loved ones, since hardly any photos and personal belongings of their loved ones were left behind, because of the heavy devastation. We then decided to develop a support group to document their experiences. The writing project is now underway. I hope that this group would be a

way for the teachers to continue providing support to one another and making closures of one part of their lives, as they moved along this life journey. Within a year after the earthquake, all the four teachers had already started dating. I even had the privilege of meeting their new love. I was impressed by the speed with which they were moving on in their life course, despite the horrendous disruption inflicted by the earthquake. In fact, I begin to wonder if they are much more resilient than I have thought and able to cope with grief, better than I do.

### **Stepping on stones in recovery**

Growing up on a small island state that has few rivers, I experience river crossings only when I leave the country. I often stood by the vibrant Min river in Sichuan in the past year, in awe, wondering if I would ever survive should I fall into it. I learned that I must be cautious, even just standing on the stones by the riverbank. My involvement in the Sichuan earthquake relief for the past year had been a daunting experience. I had stepped on many stones as I crossed this rapidly flowing and meandering river of post-quake reconstruction. I shall highlight three of the many stones that I found most meaningful to me.

The first stone that I found amazing and helpful for recovery work was the resourcefulness of the local residents, both as individuals and as a group, in helping themselves. I was impressed by the ability of the Sichuan people, including the little children who were adversely affected by it, in recovering from this horrendous earthquake. In general, we did not see Sichuanese “waiting, depending, and demanding” (deng kao yao [等、靠、要]). There were many who had started building their own homes, without waiting for subsidy payment from the government as housing aid policy continued to evolve, and even if it meant that the government might ask them to tear down and rebuild.

One of the more commonly known and well-established principles that guided social workers in Sichuan was the principle of “help people to help self” (zhu ren zi zhu [助人自助]) (Zhang *et al.* 2009). There was an emphasis on “competent assistance”, that is, to encourage service users not to qualify for help by pleading helplessness (Meldgaard 2005, p. 21). Generous and continuous donations that poured in at the rescue phase, for the students, such as toys, stationeries, computers, and expensive equipment for schools, were not necessarily helpful. For instance, some students in certain areas that attracted a lot of media coverage received three to five school bags, whereas others did not receive anything. Inevitably, some students developed a pattern of demanding gifts from visitors and workers at first sight. However, I found that most of the children were just as undemanding as their parents were and able to take care of themselves.

As we cautiously looked for PTSD symptoms amongst the children we worked with, in the seriously hit earthquake areas, we were relieved to find that symptoms were apparently not rampant. I think it is connected to the way the children are brought up. Where we worked, the village residents gave young children ample space and time to

play and explore on their own, without provision of toys and close supervision, which were common in urban cities. Older siblings or cousins helped to look out for the younger ones (peasants and minority groups were allowed to have two children in general, in a one-child population policy context). This pattern of upbringing seemed to establish social bonding from a young developmental stage.

In addition, I learned much about the development of informal social support. Individuals and organizations in Sichuan were most ready to participate informally in the earthquake relief. I was transported to an earthquake zone by a taxi driver who refused to accept payment. He felt grateful that an outsider like me was willing to help and so he wanted to return a favour and contribute to the relief efforts. An internationally renowned Chinese advertiser and adjunct university professor, who had taken leave from work, walked into one of our social work stations one day and volunteered to help, even if he were asked to sweep the floor. A huge furniture outlet in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan, generously donated second-hand office furniture to our school social work stations, which was worth 70,000 Renminbi (equivalent to USD10,243). We were thankful that the local universities that we partnered with, in the expanded school mental health network, had started tapping their own resources, in terms of labour and financial contributions, to add to the donations that we had been able to raise. It would be a great amiss for social work and other practitioners not to tap on such rich resources in working with the Sichuan earthquake-affected residents. Hence, the second stone that was significant to me was tapping on the available social support networks of Sichuan people.

Beyond Sichuan, I am inspired and encouraged by many individuals and organizations from Hong Kong, Canada, and Singapore, who have generously supported our endeavour in serving the students, though I now realize that trying to raise funds can be a tedious and trying process. In the past year, the social support network that developed, in response to the needs in post-quake Sichuan, was like the four rivers and gorges merging together, as reflected in the name “Sichuan”; members of the network joined spontaneously and I believed would continue to grow in strength and become more dynamic.

The third stone that I found fascinating and to be treaded on carefully in disaster recovery work was the need to be mindful of applying non-Chinese social work models, values and beliefs, especially from an *etic* perspective, that is, from an outsider’s perspective. Psychotherapists, psychologists, and social workers are trained to think, perceive and behave using a particular paradigm and theoretical framework. We inevitably “frame” the people we intend to serve, using certain mental schema. Working from a medical model, mental health professionals may be using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) to detect PTSD. Relevant tools, which need to be culturally determined and adjusted, may be used for assessment and testing. However, the need to administer professional assessments and tools sensitively and at appropriate times cannot be overemphasized, lest we create more problems for the people and communities we intend to serve. On the other hand, from a strengths model perspective, workers may be too eager to explore the abilities and resources of people, shun the use of professional assessment, and provide minimal intervention. In a crisis

situation, this may be dangerous, especially if professional services could provide immediate relief, in a timely fashion, for mental health conditions and challenging circumstances.

External professionals should also be aware that the different worldviews and approaches between various professions might have an adverse impact on the individuals, groups and the communities they aimed to serve. When professionals staunchly hold on to their particular paradigms and perspectives, they may disagree or even be in conflict with the other professionals serving the same group of disaster survivors. I remembered having a heated argument with colleagues from another discipline about our approach in working in Sichuan. These colleagues subscribed to the postmodern worldview that there was no absolute truth, and therefore there was little need to define or assess a problem, and “professional” social work interventions were not required. Whilst I do not claim that I know better, I believe that there is a need to assess, as well as to intervene, especially in situations where there are safety, abuse, poverty and other pressing issues (Minuchin, 1998). On the situation of two children fighting, they proposed an alternative view that the children could be just having fun. That might have been right, but when the two children began to throw rocks at one another, I thought intervention would be appropriate. I was also concerned about how the young local workers would reconcile highly diverse views expressed by the external “experts”. Eventually, my colleagues and I kept the conversation to ourselves and did not publicly discuss our differences so as not to confuse the social workers, who needed support and guidance in serving the residents in post-quake Sichuan.

I have also learned not to rigidly impose standards and practices that we usually observe in Hong Kong and Singapore with the local Chinese social workers, for a simple reason: they are young and inexperienced. The social workers that we had recruited were between 20 to 22 years old. Their supervisors were between 27 to 29 years old, with little direct service practice experiences, and were first-time supervisors in direct practice. In fact, all external supervisors, including myself, had no prior disaster management experiences. It is insensible to impose practice standards that may be applicable to other contexts. For instance, we were concerned about boundary issues between professional and personal life for the workers. They had to live in the makeshift housing estates where their office and living quarters were in the same location. They befriended the service users, and even lived and ate with them when they visited the villages. In the unique post-quake circumstances where there was a lack of resources, practice standards differed. Moreover, these standards were adapted to different cultural practices. I had started to feel more comfortable in drinking beer with teachers who belonged to the ethnic minority groups. They felt most comfortable talking casually over a beer, and less comfortable in structured sessions, at a fix time and in counseling rooms, even if we could find one. One element that facilitated our work for the past year was the genuine relationships that we had developed with various residents in Sichuan. In addition, I held high regard for the young social workers’ devotion to serving the people, though they often felt inadequate in their knowledge and skills.

My PolyU colleagues and I are committed to working closely with the residents whom we have the privilege of knowing in Mianzhu and Wenchuan counties. We are indeed crossing the river, step by step, and giving support to one another as we tread carefully and with great hopes.

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Table 1: Statistics relating to the four schools in the expanded school mental health project in post-quake Sichuan

	Primary School A	Primary School B	Primary School C	Secondary School D	Total
Post earthquake Student numbers	135	1700	1200	786	3821
Death toll [students]	322	228	3	-	553
Students who lost parents	6	65	10	5	86
Students who were injured**	8	101	3	4	116
Students who lacked supervision	20%	30%	50%	-	-
Students who stayed in school during weekdays	19	300	-	-	319
Students who were relocated to another town	-	-	-	786	786
No. of teachers	30	100	100	52	282

\*\*Students who had been severely injured but were unable to return to school was not reported or known.