

## **State, Profession, and Religion: Reflecting on Spirituality and Indigenous Social Work in China in the Yushu Earthquake Relief**

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### **Abstract**

On April 14, 2010 a massive earthquake measuring 7.1M<sub>s</sub> (CEA, CENC) struck the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, China. Its scale notwithstanding, it has received much less national and international attention than the also immense Wenchun quake of 2008 in Sichun Province. This field report discusses the contribution of religion and spirituality in post-disaster relief in Yushu. It also calls for critical reflection on the issue of homogenization in the discussion of indigenous social work in China, and perhaps in other multiethnic countries in the world.

**Keywords:** disaster, religion, spirituality, state, indigenous social work, Yushu earthquake, China

## **A forgotten disaster**

On April 14, 2010, at 7:49am, a massive earthquake measuring 7.1M<sub>s</sub> (CEA, CENC) struck the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, China. It was another immense earthquake after the 2008 Wenchun Earthquake in Sichun Province in China. According to the Xinhua News Agency, in Yushu 2,698 people were dead, 270 missing, and 12,135 injured. Seventy percent of the schools in Yushu County-City collapsed. In Gyêgu Town almost all (99%) of the wood-earth buildings collapsed, and many larger structures were damaged or destroyed.

By comparison with the national and international attention to the Wenchun Earthquake, including annual commemoration (admittedly waning over the years), the Yushu Earthquake is little spoken of. The political sensitivity of Yushu as a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture may have inhibited open and public discussion in the media and among Chinese academics and researchers. Particularly under-reported was the contribution of thousands of Tibetan monks in providing both spiritual and culturally appropriate material support to the victims immediately after the Yushu quake.

This field report draws on internal and public field documents and discussions with a local team of social work teachers, researchers, students, and social workers who participated in Yushu post-disaster relief, as well as with other local people and NGO staff. Through comparing the state-led disaster relief and local response to disaster, we show the limit of the state-led disaster relief model and Han-dominant professional social work intervention in China. We argue that disaster social work must be linked to spirituality and need to learn from local knowledge holders for culturally relevant and local specific effective practices.. To date,

discussion of indigenous social work in China has largely assumed a homogenous Han Chinese culture. Little attention has been given to the diverse ethnic minority cultures in China, or to what it means to indigenize social work in China in relation to these ethnic minority populations. This paper calls for critical reflection on indigenous social work in China that may also speak to indigenous social work in other multiethnic countries, as well as contribute to discussion about social work working with disaster survivors in indigenous regions.

### **Disaster and social work**

Social work in Western societies has a long history of responding to the aftermath of natural disasters. In the past social work interventions in disasters have mostly focused on the work of relief and recovery for affected individuals, families, and communities, and on addressing the special needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups (Ku, Ip and Xiong, 2009; Dominelli, 2009; Cherry and Cherry, 1996; Javadian, 2007; Shahar, 1993; Sim, 2010; Zakours, 1996). Some researchers, however, argue that in order for a disaster-affected area to overcome the devastation and embark on a sustainable path to reconstruction, the empowerment and participation of local community organizations and residents are critical (Dominelli, 2015; Harrell and Zakour, 2000; Ozerdem, 2003; Pyles, 2007; Vandeventer, 2004; Zedlewski, 2006).

The recent emergence of social work as a profession in China left it unprepared for disaster intervention. Prior to the Wenchuan Earthquake, social work intervention in managing disasters simply did not exist in the academic or practice agenda of social work training in China. When the Wenchuan quake struck in 2008, few social workers were ready to work with the affected communities. Later, when they were called upon to engage in disaster relief, many felt

they were “crossing the river by feeling the stones” (Sim, 2009, p. 165). At first Chinese social workers sought to learn from international experiences; later, some Chinese social work educators and practitioners demonstrated that social work practices are contextualized, and their intervention approaches differed from those of their Western counterparts (Pei, Zhang and Ku, 2009). Their experiences confirm that disaster social work intervention must be culturally relevant and locality-specific; it must consider the links among the social, political, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability (Ku and Dominelli, 2017; Ku and Ma, 2015).

Immediately after Wenchuan and the adjacent regions in Sichuan were hit by the earthquake, disaster relief was mainly defined as a government responsibility, to be carried out chiefly by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and local officials. Social workers lacked legitimacy and recognition in the eyes of local communities and government. Much of their initial involvement in Wenchuan was motivated primarily by an altruistic and humanistic commitment (Pei, Zhang and Ku, 2009). The Wenchuan Earthquake became a turning point for social workers in China in developing a new professional identity by assuming a new mission of responding to disaster and taking on a new role in the service of the vulnerable, and by applying various Western approaches, such as the strengths-based perspective and the asset-based approach (Green and Haines, 2002; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Saleebey, 2004; Sim et al., 2013) in a Chinese context.

The Yushu Earthquake in 2010, however, challenged this newly forged Han-centred (the Han being the ethnic majority in China) professional identity. Same as in Wenchuan, social workers lacked legitimacy and recognition in Yushu. The local government and local community did not know what social work was and treated social workers as relief volunteers. , Social work has no role to play in the first stage of disaster relief as emergency relief is immediately taken up

by the People's Liberation Army, while the primary needs of shelter, food and other survival necessities are all provided by the Chinese government and authorized NGOs and Foundations (e.g. the Red Cross). In China, the role of social work in disaster intervention is still under debate. Based on the experience in Wenchuan, social workers are generally identified as community psychological supporters, community development organizers and facilitators, and capacity builders (Pei, Zhang and Ku, 2009). However, as we will discuss in this paper, many of these roles were efficiently played by local NGOs in Yushu, rather than social workers, due to language barrier and the specific political context of Yushu. Furthermore, the case of Yushu also reveals the importance of religion and spirituality in disaster relief and recovery, something that has not yet been fully discussed in social work literatures, especially in China. More important, it calls for a conception of indigenous social work in China that is more fluid and goes beyond the dominant Han Chinese culture.

### **Religion and spirituality in disaster**

The past decade has seen a growth in the number of psychological studies of the relationship of religion and spirituality to disaster response and coping. Their review of the research led Aten et al. (2014) to introduce a framework for spiritually oriented disaster psychology for mental health professionals. The exposure by the chaotic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina of the gaps in the United States' disaster policies spurred Koenig (2006) to argue that religious organizations can offer emotional and spiritual care to victims. In a study of adults in south Louisiana during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Tausch et al. (2012) found that three dimensions of religion – outreach support from the faith community; religious practices, such as

prayer; and spiritual beliefs – were vital resources for their coping and personal growth in the post-disaster period. An ethnographic study of African American Hurricane Katrina Survivors by Alawiyah et al. (2011) also showed the significance of spirituality and religion for the survivors' recovery process. Their interviews with local service providers, however, indicated that few practitioners utilized spirituality or religion as a resource. They call for social workers working with disaster survivors to understand that spirituality can be a source of resilience, and that better coordination between faith-based and secular service providers is needed, because religious institutions are critical sources of support for African Americans. In some cases, the lack of coordination or collaboration between religious and secular organizations in post-disaster relief may be politically based. In her study of partnership for social service delivery in Indonesia in disaster relief and poverty alleviation programs, Sakai (2012) found that the Indonesian Government's perception of a threat from religious and faith-based organizations has limited the formation of effective partnerships between the state and faith-based organizations for offering coordinated services.

Disasters also have a demonstrated impact on survivors' views of and relationships with a divine or higher power (Aten et al., 2012; Briggs, Apple and Aydlett, 2004; McCombs, 2010; O'Grady et al., 2012; Stratta et al., 2013). Noting the important process of meaning-making following traumatic events, O'Grady et al. (2012) argue that the significance of spirituality is in "transforming a traumatic event from a moment of destructiveness to a moment of challenge and new perspective" (p. 297). In their study of the Haiti Earthquake survivors, the majority of participants reported an increased faith in a higher power and a renewed interest in practising their religion. In particular, those who perceived their "specialness" to God, and felt some form of spiritual transcendence, were more likely to experience post-traumatic growth and spiritual

transformation. Findings from Augustine's study (2014) of adult tsunami survivors in India also suggest that helping survivors make meaning out of their traumatic experience may facilitate post-disaster growth. The roles of religion, spirituality, and rituals in disasters, especially in relation to meaning-making, are similarly emphasized in Kalayjian and Eugene's two edited volumes (2010), *Mass trauma and emotional healing around the world: Rituals and practices for resilience and meaning-making*.

Research also identifies cultural and context-specific considerations, including of religion and spirituality, in disaster relief and recovery (Hoeberichts, 2012; Jang and LaMendola, 2007; Kalayjian and Eugene, 2010; O'Grady et al., 2012). O'Grady et al. (2012) remind us to be sensitive to the different cultural interpretations of religious meaning-making. Grandiosity, for example, was deemed pathological in the field of mental health. In the context of Haiti's complex history of slavery, oppression, and revolution, O'Grady et al.'s finding of spiritual grandiosity among the Haiti Earthquake survivors instead reflected a boosted sense of personal identity against perceived threats such as natural disasters, which served as a factor protecting against and mitigating traumatic stress.

Religion and spirituality can, however, be sensitive topics in China. They are missing from the many publications on social work interventions in the Wenchuan Earthquake (Bian et al., 2009; Pei, Zhang and Ku, 2009; Liu, 2009, 2010; Sim et al. 2012; Sim, 2009, 2010, 2011), despite some of these authors' recognition of the need for cultural sensitivity in their interactions with survivors of local Qiang and Zang ethnic minority cultures. The case report by Zhengjia Ren (2012), a clinical psychologist in Chengdu, China, may be the only publication that discusses the significance of spirituality in the Wenchuan victims' recovery. He writes: "Spirituality pervades every aspect of our lives", and, "Chinese people live in the daily presence

of the spiritual”, especially for those living in the remote rural and mountainous regions of China’s interior provinces (p. 976). In his search for the meaning of spirituality in the context of Chinese culture, Ren identifies Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and folk religions as some of the spiritual resources upon which Chinese culture is based. Notwithstanding a Han Chinese dominant view of Chinese culture, he acknowledges the complexity and diversity of the latter, and that the spiritual lives of Chinese people are varied. Ren notes that to the local people spirituality represents a wide range of experiences, including their sense of responsibility to the family and community, as well as their connection to their ancestors. He argues that only approaches “rooted and grounded within the community’s own spiritual life and from their culture” (pp. 988-989) can be effective and appropriate. Local rituals and practices, such as visiting the temple to recite a liturgy for the dead, or holding religious ceremonies, local music and community circle dances, and a father returning to his home village to help with reconstruction were found to be more effective “behavior psychotherapy” than any of the Western medicine and the Western model of mental illness and psychotherapy the author had learned to use in his work with the victims. Ren rightly argues that “the site of greatest trauma is often spiritual, not biochemical” (p. 988). What people have lost in disasters is not just their family or property, but a meaning system that had been core in their life. Ren concludes that to work effectively with geographically and cultural diverse populations we need “to set aside our personal preconceptions about the world.... to enter authentically into the local community and observe their mode of life on a daily basis, along with their folk customs and taboos.... to listen to the myths and legends of their families and their community and consider how these stories influence their spirits and construct their understanding of the ultimate meaning of life” (p. 987). Similarly, the need for a different paradigm of care, that includes religion in recovering the



strengths of the victims in disaster relief, is also echoed in Ting's (2016) observation of the Tibetan "open-hearted" attitude towards life and death after the Yushu Earthquake.

### **Entering the field**

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (hereafter the PolyU) has a strong social work network in Mainland China with more than 250 graduates who are university social work teachers, government officials and NGO practitioners in different provinces of China. As with the Wenchuan Earthquake, the PolyU responded immediately to the Yushu Earthquake. A team of social work teachers, including the PolyU faculty, was quickly formed. Disaster response trainings were organized in collaboration with a local university in Qinghai in the hope of setting up a social work station in Yushu to support post-disaster recovery and reconstruction. But the team soon realized a major difference between Yushu and Wenchuan. Geographically, Yushu is located amidst snowy mountains and glaciers at an average altitude of 4,300 m. Its average temperature ranges between -25 degrees Celsius and 22 degrees Celsius. Most unadapted outsiders find it difficult to adjust to its high altitude and cold climate. Many suffer from altitude sickness. Culturally, Yushu is a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Ninety-seven percent of its population are Tibetans, all of whom are Vajrayāna Buddhist. Most people in China have little understanding of or appreciation for Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. Liu, Fan, and Shi (2011), for example, in their report identify the influence of Tibetan Buddhism as a factor that presented "great difficulties and challenges" (p. 48) to the Chinese government's relief effort in the Yushu Earthquake. Politically, the Chinese government exercised rigid control over the region, and over outsiders' entrance. Language barriers, even among Tibetans from different regions, exacerbated

the challenge. Tibetan teachers and students from Qinghai who spoke the Amdo Tibetan language, for example, found it difficult to communicate with local Kham Tibetans in Yushu.

The PolyU team was thus unable to work directly in Yushu and they only **provided funding support, training, consultation, and guidance on action research and the operational framework of post-disaster recovery**. Much of the onsite disaster relief effort like helping government distribute relief resource was rather carried out by a team of local teachers and students from the partnering local university in Qinghai. However, actually the local team could not do very much because of the reasons that we mentioned above. The data of this field report draws on internal and public field documents, as well as interviews and discussions with the local team and other local actors who were involved in Yushu post-disaster relief in various capacities with a variety of education or government units. They include: four local teachers, five student volunteers, and an onsite social worker, as well as two core staff, each from a different local non-government organization (NGO). During team meetings or field visits, they were invited to describe what they observed in the field and what they heard from the local people and government officials, as well as to share about the difficulties of social work disaster intervention in indigenous places like Yushu. In 2016 the first author was able to visit Yushu and learn more from local people about their Yushu post-quake relief experience. Given the political sensitivity of the Yushu Earthquake, we are mindful of protecting the anonymity of our informants, and will not reveal much identifying information. All names are pseudonyms.

In what follows we will discuss the state response to the Yushu Earthquake and the challenges faced by the social work profession, and compare them with the part played by local religious and secular organizations in the post-quake relief effort, all within the culturally and locality-specific context of Yushu as a predominantly Tibetan populated region.

## **State-led disaster response: Strengths and limits**

### ***Strong state, swift response***

Like its response to the Wenchuan Earthquake, the Chinese government's response to the earthquake in Yushu was speedy and highly coordinated. Within two hours a disaster response emergency meeting was called between the Qinghai Communist Party Committee and the Qinghai Provincial Government. A disaster rescue leading group was immediately struck to coordinate all government units into the emergency operation. Emergency offices were set up in the Provincial Office of Civil Affairs, the Disaster Relief Office, the Financial Planning Office, the Provincial Charity Federation, and the Provincial Relief Material Reserve Center, with staff on duty round the clock.

In Yushu City and Gyêgu Town disaster rescue leading groups were promptly set up to coordinate various frontline work groups for: (1) relief goods and funds reception and distribution, (2) donation reception and statistics; (3) emergency case management, (4) integrated service provision, (5) communication and news release, (6) disaster assessment, (7) dead bodies management, (8) burial and funeral, and (9) emergency backup support. Disaster relief warehouses in Southern Qinghai, including Yushu, were immediately opened. On the day of the quake 9,500 tents, 5,000 winter coats, 10,000 mattresses, numerous generators, emergency lights, military camping beds, and basic living necessities were shipped to the disaster sites. Donations received as of May 20 amounted to 91 million RMB, which included 3929.25 tons of

food, 171,937 bottles of water, 163,101 articles of clothing, 346 tons of cooking oil, 935.69 tons of medical supplies and equipment, 21,071 folding beds, and so on.

The presence of government officials and Communist Party members on the rescue and relief sites just several hours after the quake struck and throughout continuing aftershocks was a clear sign of strong leadership and organizational assurance for post-disaster relief. Provincial Government policies and regulations were shortly issued to ensure a smooth and orderly disaster relief operation. These policies included: Measures for the Administration of Donations for the Earthquake in Yushu of Qinghai, Measures for the Management of Disaster Relief Material Disbursement in Yushu of Qinghai, Measures for the Issuance of Solatium in Yushu of Qinghai, Measure for the Issuance of Subsidies for Emergency Moving in Yushu of Qinghai, and Measures for Issuance of Living Allowances for the *Sangu* Members (the childless elderly, orphans, and disabled) in Yushu of Qinghai.

### ***Provision gaps and inefficiency at the local government level***

Despite the rapid response of the Chinese central and provincial governments in mobilizing the state disaster response machinery, effective implementation largely depends on the efficiency and capacity of local governments. The Yushu Earthquake exposed the paralysis of government at the local level. Like many counties in China, local authorities in Yushu were unclear about local population statistics, such as how many were registered permanent residents and how many were non-registered, coming from outside. According to one of the local social work teachers, Q, local officials in Yushu told her that everything was unclear at the local level. The head of a county Communist Party council said: “There is just no community in Yushu, not

to mention district management. According to official statistics, there are 90,000 or so victims in the quake. But 300,000 victims showed up when relief goods were distributed”. It is not true, in fact, that there was no community in Yushu; rather, the local team could see strong cohesion among local Tibetans, as reflected in the local indigenous organizations’ and monasteries’ ability to promptly meet the needs of local people in post-disaster relief, something we will discuss later.

No clear figures meant much confusion, and distribution of relief goods was a challenge, resulting in seriously unfair distribution of goods and funds. For example, victims on the Gyêgu Town official registry list had an abundance of tents, and were given enough food to last a year and a half. Those without official registration in Gyêgu, even if they were from nearby villages, received almost no government relief subsidies. Most had to rely on the tents and food given out by the monasteries. According to Q, the population makeup in Gyêgu was quite mixed. Apart from registered permanent residents, there was a large migrant population, including Tibetan nomadic residents from nearby villages, who worked in Gyêgu, Tibetans from Sichuan Province, who opened restaurants, and Han Chinese traders from outside. There were also Tibetans on a pilgrimage to Yushu. Q recalled her experience of being surrounded by over a hundred Tibetans from Dêgê County in Sichuan in the horserace field (Saimachang) where the majority of victims had settled, and who told her of their plights: “The Central Government said Tibetans and Han people are a family. How come we Tibetans from Sichuan are not treated as human? We have received nothing. We have lived in Gyêgu for over ten years. My whole family is here, and has bought land and a house. The earthquake has destroyed everything. We have nothing now, and cannot turn back. We have four families crowded in one tent. We have nothing but several boxes of instant noodles.” The first author heard similar stories from local NGO staff during his Yushu

visit later in 2016. The registry system in China means that migrant and nomadic populations are often left out or treated unfairly in disaster relief. Yushu was no exception.

As we observed in the case of the Wenchuan Earthquake, China is not lacking in disaster relief goods. But there is little sensitivity to the culturally and locality-specific environment. Most of the population in Yushu are Tibetans who have particular cultural food and living habits. There was no cultural consideration in the delivery of instant noodles and biscuits to the victims. As another local social work teacher, Y, said, local Tibetans told them not to deliver any more instant noodles; they wanted yak butter tea. They needed to cook their meals. In the government's standardized disaster relief operation, these basic necessities for Tibetans could hardly be met. The tents shipped to the disaster site would not be adequate for local people to live through the winter, with temperatures falling below -30 degrees Celsius. Damage to and pollution of the local environment were also not considered. The victims' settlement site in the horseshoe field was filled with garbage. Discarded plastic water bottles piled high, polluting the pasture and water sources in Yushu, and affecting the local people's health.

### **Challenges for social work intervention**

Drawing on their experience in the Wenchuan Earthquake, but not being able to enter Yushu, the PolyU team focused their efforts on providing disaster response trainings and research consultation for the local social work team in Qinghai. Upon entry into Yushu, however, the local team soon faced tremendous challenges. First, although they also came from Qinghai Province, they were unfamiliar with the locality-specific religion and culture in Yushu. Second, as members of a nascent profession in China, these social work teachers and students

felt their knowledge and experience of post-disaster relief and recovery to be inadequate. As shared by one of the teachers, they were at a loss to know what they could do onsite. Third, social work was unknown to the local government and people. The former in particular felt that social work teachers and students were only worsening an already chaotic situation. Fourth, as mentioned, even though there were Tibetan teachers and students in the team, they spoke Amdo Tibetan, which is different from the Kham Tibetan spoken in Yushu. Language barriers thus presented great difficulties for the local team in their desire to communicate with and gain access to the affected communities and to understand their needs.

Attempts were also made to enlist social work teachers from other Chinese universities, but most responded unfavourably given the region's political sensitivity. In fact, the Ministry of Civil Affairs appointed three social work teachers and researchers from Qinghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou to conduct post-disaster needs assessment in Yushu immediately after the quake; but two of the teachers soon suffered from altitude sickness and consequent high blood pressure. Although they persisted in completing the assessment, they both admitted that the situation in Yushu was too complex, and the physical environment too harsh, for any social workers from outside to do much. They thus declined to participate in any further post-disaster projects.

According to Y, the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS) also set up a tent in Gyêgu to provide psychological counselling. As it was not part of the local culture to seek counselling from psychologists, though, no local people visited their tent. It is thus puzzling to us how CAS collected their data on the Yushu survivors' post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health diagnosis (Zhang et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2012).

During his visit to Yushu in 2016, the first author had an opportunity to speak to an NGO core staff, S, who was actively involved in the post-disaster relief work at the time in Yushu.

Talking about post-quake social work intervention, S said: “It’s not that there was no social work presence then; there was but, frankly, it was very little. The Guangdong Province Social Worker Association came. But many could not acclimatize to the high altitude, and had to leave quickly.” S also told an interesting story that revealed the ignorance of the outsiders. Some young people in that social work team arrived with great enthusiasm, but, not knowing better, soon started drinking. “How can you drink at such a high altitude?” S recounted in disbelief. In the end, the army had to fly them out in a helicopter. “Were they not causing more trouble, instead of being helpful?” S questioned. The physical environment, language and cultural barriers, as well as political sensitivity, all made it impossible for social workers from outside to establish station and provide post-disaster recovery support in Yushu.

### **A different scene in the Yushu disaster relief effort**

What was seldom mentioned about the Yushu Earthquake was the active involvement of many local religious and secular organizations in Qinghai. Local non-governmental organizations, such as the Snowland Great Rivers Environmental Protection Association, The Jinba Project, and the Snowland Service Group, had distributed relief goods amounting to over 10.075 million RMB. Their funding and resources were collected from their various networks of foundations, corporations, and organizational and individual donors. Immediately after the quake, the Snowland Service Group organized a team of core executives from seven local organizations in Qinghai Province to form a Yushu Earthquake relief action group. Working in coordination and collaboration, the joint office was set up in Xining (the capital city of Qinghai) on the day after the quake, April 15, for relief goods collection, and another in Xinzhai Village in



Gyêgu Town for rescue assessment and relief goods distribution. On April 16 relief goods were delivered to Gyêgu Town. The Yushu Jamtse Charity Association, another local NGO that had provided services in the areas of Tibetan education, health care, culture, and economic and social development, were onsite on the day of the quake, successfully rescuing children from an orphanage and transferring them safely to Xiangda Town in Nangqên County, four hours from Yushu City. On April 15 they delivered relief goods to 820 elementary students. On April 22 the Yushu Shepherd Association set up a hotline in Yushu to receive calls and provide updates on the earthquake affected areas. They also sent a team of nine staff to visit the 50 students and their families served by the Yak Butter Lamp Children's House, an NGO providing services for orphans, poor children, and single parent-family children.

A local NGO named The Jinba Project (Jinba) targeted poor households in their service and relief goods distribution, including victims of various ethnic groups who had settled in Qamdo, Garzê and nearby areas but were considered “outsiders”, with no registered status in Yushu, and were thus not on the government list for relief subsidies. In particular they focused their efforts on sanitation, hygiene, and health education in the horserace field where the majority of the victims from the six counties settled. Their health education covered: (1) emotional comfort to vulnerable populations, such as orphans, childless elderly, people with a disability, and women; (2) environmental health, sanitation, and hygiene, such as providing education on disinfection, proper waste and excreta disposal, and changes in hygiene habits; (3) control of communicable diseases and prevention of epidemics; and (4) female hygiene practice education. Besides exhibition boards, they creatively used *tangkas* to present health and hygiene information. *Tangka* is a Tibetan term that means “something that can be rolled up”; it refers to a painting used for Buddhist teaching and meditation. It serves as a pictorial lesson that the

observer can remember by association with painted icons. As well, Jinba distributed 1,000 thermoses, 2,000 pots, 2,000 spray bottles, 4,200 bottles of disinfectants, 10,000 packs of female hygiene pads, 23 waste disposal racks, and so on to disaster victims from all the six affected counties, as well as to “non-registered” victims in nearby Tibetan regions. To maintain the sustainability of the project, Jinba worked with various disaster victim settlement command stations to select hygiene management staff at each site to take charge of disposal management and site disinfection. Satisfied with the effectiveness of their locality- and culturally specific approach to hygiene management and education, the Chinese government gave Jinba permission to continue their service in the disaster stricken areas.

Familiar with the local environment and situations, these local NGOs were able to gain the trust of local people and access to local communities. They were also able to enter the victim settlement sites and nearby disaster affected areas to conduct needs assessments. The collected information enabled them to effectively distribute relief goods to targeted households. They set up mobile water stations to deliver clean drinking water, as well as waste collection stations, at each site, and organized volunteers and local people to collect garbage and promote environmental protection in the settlement sites.

What was unique and most remarkable, and yet under-reported, in the Yushu post-quake relief was the involvement of local Tibetan monasteries. The disaster relief they gave the victims was eye-opening. As another local social work teacher, Z, said: “We outsiders and so-called professional social workers just can’t do what they do. It was really humbling to see.”

Jyekundo Dondrubling Monastery in Gyêgu Town was particularly active in post-quake rescue. As the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Yushu, with 550 monks, its history can be traced back 2,000 years. Despite the severe damage to the monastery buildings, 300 monks were

quickly gathered, and divided into three teams to help with rescue in three major residential areas where many buildings had collapsed. With no equipment, these monks dug with their bare hands through the rubble for survivors, regardless of cuts and abrasions even after long hours of digging. Like many rescue workers at the scene, they ate nothing and took no rest in the first 24 hours. It was estimated that the monks rescued more than 600 survivors.

Tibetan monks also helped deliver relief goods. The local team recounted their astonishment at the scene of almost 10,000 monks coming from various Tibetan monasteries around Yushu to the disaster sites with various relief goods, especially Tibetans' staple food *tsampa*. According to the local team, though no exact statistics were recorded, Jyekundo Dondrubling Monastery recalled having delivered approximately 60 truck-loads of relief goods. Monks from some monasteries also delivered relief funds themselves to the victims. They did not merely station themselves at a central location where victims could come to collect the goods; they went around, visiting each tent, seeking out those who were most often left out of the government's relief list -- that is, those who had no registered household in Gyêgu, as well as the "*sangu*": the childless elderly, orphans, and people with a disability. Familiar with the local community, Jyekundo Dondrubling Monastery was instrumental in filling this major gap in the government's relief effort.

The monks also played a crucial part in retrieving bodies after the Yushu quake. When the 72-hour critical rescue period had elapsed, the monastery sent hundreds of monks to various disaster sites to collect more than a thousand dead bodies while several hundred monks continued to search for and rescue victims buried alive. In response to requests from the survivors and the Disaster Relief Command Center, Jyekundo Dondrubling Monastery conducted a mass cremation. Tibetans traditionally practise sky burial, but the large number of

Tibetans killed led local high lamas to declare traditional sky burial funeral rites too difficult. A mass cremation, presided over by local Tibetan Buddhist monks, was determined most appropriate. Monks also offered consolation to families, and performed spiritual services, such as chanting and prayers, and purification rituals for the dead, and conducted burial ceremonies. Yak butter (*dkar me* in the Tibetan language), used as Tibetan Buddhist temple lamp oil, and cedar wood, used on the altar for purification, from the monasteries were offered in the mass cremation. Non-Tibetan families of victims who wished to have individual cremations also received yak butter and cedar wood, and the spiritual service of chanting and prayers. Monks in three groups of 50 took shifts to perform chanting and prayer ceremonies non-stop for 49 days on the sky burial platform. Organized and respectful, Jyekundo Dondrubling Monastery treated the dead with dignity, and the living were comforted. They received praise from both Tibetans and Han-Chinese people.

Another significant service of the monks after the Yushu Earthquake was the emotional comfort and support they gave to survivors, most of whom were of the Tibetan Buddhist faith. Psychologists from outside were no help. First, they did not speak any Tibetan language. Second, Tibetan Buddhists have their own religious beliefs about life and death. In the face of life challenges or pain, they chant and pray to release the pain; they speak to monks for advice, or ask them to hold prayer ceremonies. If their family member dies, they are assured and at peace knowing that monks will help take care of burial matters and spiritual rituals for the dead. Conventional psychological knowledge and therapeutic models could hardly meet the spiritual needs of Tibetans. As the 72 hours of the critical rescue period passed, while hundreds of monks continued to work with rescue workers to rescue those buried yet alive victims, hundreds of others stayed in the mountain performing prayer ceremonies for the dead. The Mahāvairocana

Sutra chant reverberated through the surrounding mountain passes and valleys. Tibetans strongly believe that life, old age, sickness, and death are the normal cycle of life. Despite grief and sorrow, there was calm. A local Tibetan said: “Many people died in the quake. It is just normal that I too have a relative who died in it.” Few local Tibetans were seen wailing over the deaths of their family members or relatives. Perhaps this calm comes from the power of the Tibetans’ religious faith. What was most important for them upon the death of their family members or relatives was to recite the sutra and pray for the dead. According to Tibetans, and Buddhists in general, after death the consciousness takes 49 days (seven seven-day periods) to travel from one life to the next. Prayers conducted by the living can assist the dead through this journey, and guide them toward a good rebirth. It is thus a critical period marked by special rites. Generally, monks conduct prayer ceremonies, while the family members follow. At the end of the 49 days some also made a mini-pagoda from the ashes, and placed it in clean water, with more chanting and prayers performed during the procession. The 49-day rituals allowed Tibetans the time to grieve, to feel assured that they had done everything they could for the deceased, and to move on with this life after completing the rites.

We asked: what made local Tibetans appear relatively calm and accepting towards such a major disaster? Responses from local people and the Tibetan teachers in the local team were quite similar. In the mind of local Tibetans, they should not have had such a disaster in Qingzang Plateau, considering their reverence and devotion to protect the sacred water and mountains in the area; yet, there came this massive earthquake. To them it was an indication that nature had been violated through human action. According to the Buddhist belief in cause-and-effect, any action will result in a karmic force leading to a consequence in the future, whether in the present existence or a future one. Thus, for local Tibetans the destruction humans had caused to nature

would inevitably result in consequences for humans to bear, such as an earthquake. If it did not happen now, it would surely happen in the future -- in their lifetime, or in future generations. As they had now borne the consequence of previous human action, they could feel at peace that their future generations would be spared. As life, old age, sickness, and death are part of the natural life course, local Tibetans consider it a blessing and merit for them to be able to chant and pray for those who die before them. A local team member, Y, recounted that it was not uncommon to see many survivors spinning their prayer wheel with calm while they quietly chanted and prayed for their relatives who died in the quake. As Webb (2012) noted in his account of Tibetan religious beliefs based on his visits to Yushu prior to the quake, Tibetans live a spiritual life “connected to present circumstances with an awareness of and belief in a life not constrained by time, i.e. the existence of the continuity of consciousness” (p. 33). This spiritual outlook to life and death gives them a meaning-making structure with which to view and cope with such a major disaster.

Their participation in disaster relief did not cause the monasteries to put themselves in the media spotlight. All of their work was credited to the government. There was no riot or political disturbance in post-quake Yushu. The immediate needs of the survivors were promptly met: lives saved, and warm meals and clothes delivered. The Chinese government was nonetheless nervous about the Tibetan monasteries. Tibet independence has always been a sore point and a source of great anxiety for it. In the belief that a disaster could easily be used by Tibet independence activists to mobilize grassroots support, the government was very careful to prevent monasteries continuing their post-quake relief activities. As one of the local NGO staff, G, said: “Looking down from the mountain at the disaster site, you saw all red, as the lamas’ robes are red; how could the government not feel shaken and nervous? Would the media dare report and publish the

unedited image?” While the state-run English newspaper, *China Daily*, praised the work of the monks in order to showcase ethnic unity and a “softer side” of the government (Hu, 2010), groups of monks were nevertheless asked to leave soon after the 49-day ritual. Local authorities later issued a number of restrictions limiting the monks’ mobility to leave the mountain to perform chanting and prayer ceremonies. Political concern, as in the case of disaster relief in Indonesia (Sakai, 2012), obstructs the role of religious organizations in post-disaster recovery and healing.

### **Discussion: Spirituality, disaster relief, and indigenous social work in China**

After the two massive earthquakes in Wenchuan and Yushu, social work professional associations in China all made similar recommendations to the Chinese government. They proposed to: (1) establish a coordinated mechanism between social work and disaster relief in Yushu; (2) include social work as part of the state plan for disaster reconstruction; (3) give permission to social workers to set up stations in the disaster site, and to bring in professional social workers to assist with post-disaster community building; (3) follow the model of the city governments of Guangzhou and Shanghai, which purchase services from social work agencies; and (4) provide professional social work training to local NGOs in Yushu.

The confidence of these social work professional associations in China is a puzzle to us. By what logic do they conclude they have a part in the post-disaster recovery and rebuilding of Yushu and other Tibetan regions? The truth is that unlike the Wenchuan Earthquake, the social work profession has very little to offer in Yushu. Even though the Hong Kong Polytechnic

University was able to partner with a local university in Qinghai to set up a social work station in Yushu, the team had to leave shortly due to insurmountable challenges.

Disaster social work is locality and culturally specific. As a politically sensitive region, Yushu was tightly controlled by the state; any outside groups were closely monitored. Social workers from outside could do very little, as the government presided over almost every aspect of post-disaster rebuilding. Furthermore, the harsh climate and geographical environment also made it difficult for any social workers from outside to stay behind. Besides, Yushu is a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and most of its population are Tibetans. How many social workers from outside speak a Tibetan language and are familiar with local Tibetan culture?

What is “professional”? What kind of “social work intervention” is most suitable to non-Han places and communities like Yushu? Since social work as a profession began in China, there has been discussion of indigenizing it for the Chinese context (Chan and Chan, 2005; Cheung and Liu, 2004; Smith, 2003; Tsang and Yan, 2001; Wang, 2001; Yan and Cheung, 2006). While some authors essentialize elements of Chinese culture as incompatible with western social work concepts or models, many equate Chinese culture with Han culture. Notwithstanding that some authors argue for a pluralistic view of Chinese culture, inclusive of the many minority cultures, there has not yet been a discussion that challenges the dominance of Han Chinese culture and gives priority to minority groups’ locality- and culturally specific worldviews and approaches that have shown to be supportive of their strengths and resilience in the face of a major disaster.

The Yushu Earthquake exposed the limits of professional social work in China that is primarily Han-dominant. In terms of providing psychological counselling support or community organizing, not only were professional social workers from outside challenged by the language barrier; dominant social work approaches and models were of little use to meet the spiritual



needs of local Tibetans. The monasteries and local NGOs, on the other hand, demonstrated their understanding of and culturally appropriate response to the tangible, emotional, spiritual and community needs of local Tibetans.

As noted in Ren's (2012) candid reflection on the usefulness of psychological therapy to local people in post-disaster recovery, our experience in the Wenchuan recovery also leads us to question the dominant models of psychological counselling in professional social work in rural and culturally specific areas in China. Despite the Chinese government's recognition of psychologists and social workers in providing counselling support to Wenchuan victims, a slogan – "*fanghuo, fangdao, fangxinlizixun*" (beware of fire, beware of thieves, beware of psychological counselling) – was soon heard among local people in the quake affected areas. Local sentiments towards psychologists (or social workers who acted as counsellors) was generally negative, as many local people felt that many of the so-called psychologist experts treated them as objects of study or as pathological subjects, rather than coming to offer sincere support. Many survivors also found themselves re-traumatized after opening up to those psychologist experts, who "hit and run", without providing any constructive support. It was only when Ting (2016) stayed onsite in Yushu in long-term voluntary relief work that he was able to appreciate the survivors' healing process and resilience through their spirituality that celebrates both life and death.

Even social workers or psychologists who were aware of the need for cultural sensitivity could not have replaced the contributions of monks in the lives of local Tibetans in Yushu. Spirituality is at the heart of Tibetan culture. Monks and local Tibetans share deep spiritual roots and connections. Their religion is their source of meaning. It infuses their whole being, and their cosmology of life and death. Sutra chanting and prayers for the deliverance of their relatives who

died in the quake were their greatest sources of comfort in the post-disaster recovery. Disaster social work must be linked to spirituality.

Last, we do not deny the rapidity or the effectiveness of the Chinese government's post-disaster rescue and relief effort in Wenchuan and Yushu, nor do we dismiss the role and function of the social work profession in general. **For social work to play any meaningful role in areas with large Indigenous population, it is important that we learn and listen to the experience of local grassroots organizations for us to be a supportive force of local indigenous knowledges and experiences in post-disaster relief, recovery, and rebuilding.** In this paper, we hope to draw attention to the assumption of Han culture in the discussion of indigenous social work in China. We call for critical reflection among Han Chinese social worker scholars, educators, researchers, and practitioners on our biases in relation to the many ethnic minority populations in China; as well as among social workers in the West when working with Indigenous communities.

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