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Chinese Open Wallets for Quake Aid

Individual Giving Blooms in a Society Long Under Sole Care of the State

By Maureen Fan
Washington Post Foreign Service
Friday, May 16, 2008

BEIJING, May 15 At the headquarters of the Red Cross Society of [China](#), volunteers turned a boardroom into a makeshift cashier's office Thursday, sending tens of thousands of fluttering bank notes through counting machines and handing receipts to people like Cai Lili, 30, who stood in long lines with bricks of cash to donate to earthquake relief efforts.



Workers at the Red Cross headquarters in Shanghai process donations from people who waited in long lines with cash to help earthquake victims. (By Eugene Hoshiko -- Associated Press)

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Since a massive earthquake struck Sichuan province and surrounding regions three days ago, Chinese have donated \$192 million to help their countrymen, according to China's Civil Affairs Ministry. The fundraising has come as officials have issued a rare public appeal for cranes and rescue equipment, hammers and shovels, bandages and medicine.

In scale, the financial contributions have been unprecedented in China, which for decades taught its citizens that the state and the state alone would take care of them from cradle to grave.

There is no organized philanthropy here, and independent nongovernmental organizations are banned. Ordinary Chinese and famous Chinese, including Houston Rockets center Yao Ming, have simply decided to open their wallets to help the estimated 10 million people affected by the earthquake.

Many have given as individuals in addition to or instead of giving at the office, saying they were making a statement about their gifts coming from the heart.

"I wanted to separate the collective action from the individual action," said Cai, a clerk with the Beijing special armed police, who earlier gave \$14 at the office, then stood patiently in line Thursday to donate \$71 in her daughter's name. "Although in this diverse society, there are many conflicting values, in the face of disaster we stand together."

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On the opposite side of a table stood Zhao Shuangying, 48, sunglasses hanging from the collar of his pink polo shirt, belly protruding over a pair of white loafers. "It's very simple. I cannot go to Sichuan, so I came here to help," said Zhao, the owner of a technology company.

In his hands were several bricks of notes totaling more than \$14,000. "I want to show that it's me who's donating. It's not connected with anybody else. I'm donating in my own name," he said.

Dealing with the fallout from Monday's 7.9-magnitude quake seems likely to become a large part of the Communist Party's mission in the coming months, casting a shadow over its ambition of staging a joyful Beijing Olympics in August and testing the leadership of President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and the party's other key figures.

In the days before the ascent of private enterprise, the government compensated the disabled and gave medicine to the sick. And while farmers were often called on to help in government campaigns against insect infestations or rising floodwaters, the paternalistic nature of Chinese society made it difficult to imagine individuals stepping forward to lead or to hold officials accountable for relief efforts.

The quake that struck central China, however, has inspired a completely different outlook among ordinary Chinese, many of whom belong to the country's growing middle class.

The outpouring of support was partly in response to the unusually open news coverage of the earthquake, especially compared with the limited state-controlled coverage of previous disasters. This time, heartbreaking images, dramatic rescue accounts and humble requests for help have been the subject of nonstop live broadcasts, lengthy online postings and a large display in the lobby of the Red Cross building.

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Experts said the gifts fill an enormous need in a country that does not yet have a fully developed civil society.



Workers at the Red Cross headquarters in Shanghai process donations from people who waited in long lines with cash to help earthquake victims. (By Eugene Hoshiko -- Associated Press)

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"The Chinese value of helping others is never a problem for the people. The only problem is that there are institutional obstacles that have stopped them from showing this," said Liu Junning of the Chinese Cultural Research Institute. "There are no independent NGOs in China; even the foreign NGOs working in China have to register with the government. Real NGOs are more experienced in encouraging ordinary people to help and also in rescue work."

In an acknowledgment that many Chinese mistrust the way the government doles out financial aid, officials have promised to allow public supervision of how donation funds are spent and to submit to an audit process at the end of the relief effort, "lest misappropriations occur," said Wang Zhenyao, director of disaster relief with the Civil Affairs Ministry.

Jia Jia, 28, a Beijing-based magazine journalist, said it was his "basic duty" to donate in the wake of such a national tragedy. He also encouraged his friends to give. But when it came time to donate his \$63, he went to the Web site of the Hong Kong Red Cross.

"I don't trust Chinese NGOs, because there has been a lot of corruption in the past," Jia said. "It's a custom that's formed over the years that if you want to help people, you will choose other channels. I have to be responsible with my money."

He added that he checked the Web site of the Chinese Red Cross but couldn't find details on expenditures.

"I'm not criticizing the Chinese government-controlled NGOs, I'm just cautious," he said. "The heads of many Chinese NGOs are retired top officials, and those NGOs are registered and supervised by government departments."

China is also accepting financial aid from other governments. Taiwan, the self-ruled

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island that Beijing considers a part of China, promised \$65 million. [Saudi Arabia](#) has pledged \$50 million in cash and \$10 million in relief materials. The U.S. ambassador to China, Clark T. Randt Jr., presented a \$500,000 check from the U.S. Agency for International Development as an "initial contribution."

Yet it is the public donations that have been notable here.

"China has been through such rapid economic development in the last 30 years. So now it can raise such an impressive amount in such a short time," said Qian Gang, author of a book about the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, which killed 250,000 people, a death toll that was a state secret for many years. "Thirty years ago, it would have been impossible to imagine this."

Researcher Liu Songjie contributed to this report.

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