Disaster Citizenship and Solidarity of Informal Groups: A Case Study in Disaster-Affected Villages in Eastern China

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Abstract

This article explores how disaster-affected people respond to state-led disaster governance through the analytical concepts of solidarity and disaster citizenship. This form of governance consists of two aspects: 1) modernisation, involving resettlement for urbanisation and economic recovery as well as modern technology and infrastructure for risk prevention; and 2) moral state, manifested in the state's demonstration of compassion and its demand of gratitude. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in two flood-affected villages, I examine villagers' responses to the state's governing of public opinion, resettlement and recovery. The study reveals that villagers contested the government's control of public opinion by forming communal opinions, resisted resettlement and remade places out of state-designed space for reconstruction in informal groups such as neighbourhoods and kin. Besides existing social ties, villagers built their solidarity with a shared sense of socioeconomic justice rooted in a long tradition of state-society interactions. Their solidarity was enhanced but also undermined by state-led disaster governance. Nonetheless, villagers reinforced and redefined their claims to entitlement and negotiated their autonomy. This article concludes that social practices and experiences of the villagers embody disaster citizenship in rural China through solidarity of informal groups negotiating post-disaster life on their own terms.

Keywords: *state-led disaster governance; public opinion; recovery; resettlement; routine and ritual*

This article can be accessed at https://doi: 10.22439/cjas.v42i2.7456

Introduction

In December 2020, I attended an apartment lottery for Water-Stone[1] villagers who excitedly awaited resettlement into apartment compounds built by the local county government in eastern China. In summer 2019, a typhoon generated heavy rain that resulted in a massive, deadly landslide in Water-Stone. Falling rocks from the landslide dammed the river flowing through the village, causing extensive, destructive flash flooding when the natural landslide dam failed during the intense rainfall. Dozens of villagers lost their lives. The neighbouring village of Wood-Rock was also affected by the flood and suffered several, although relatively minor, mudslides. Within a week after the Water-Stone/Wood-Rock disaster, the county government issued a decision to relocate the entire village of Water-Stone. New apartment compounds were built 15 kilometres away at a new village (which I call New Town) to accommodate the villagers, some of whom moved in by January 2020. However, by March 2022, approximately 15 per cent of households had still not relocated; instead, they resolved against resettlement. These villagers chose to stay in their houses, which remained intact after the flood.

Researchers have studied state-society interactions during disasters in contemporary China mainly from the perspective of the state, its local agents and societal forces outside the affected communities (Kang 2015; Paltemaa 2017; Sorace 2014). In terms of disaster-affected populations' relations with the state, scholars have mainly focused on changes in trust and degrees of satisfaction (Sorace 2014: 420; You *et al*. 2020: 142). There have been short discussions on survivors' practices under government-led reconstruction in research focusing on the state. For example, in examining top-down government-led resettlement after the Sichuan Province earthquake in 2008, Sorace (2014: 412) describes a collective appeal by affected residents against previous government-led demolition of people's homes. The appeal demonstrated the affected population's agency in employing officially sanctioned legal tools to protect their rights. Despite such accounts, it remains underexplored how disaster-affected populations respond to state-led disaster governance besides appeals, especially when governance is not adequate or satisfactory. How does their relationship with the state evolve in response to state-led governance?

In this article, I examine how villagers responded to the government's various ways of dealing with the disaster in Water-Stone and Wood-Rock. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the two neighbouring flood-affected villages, I argue that villagers practised what I describe as *disaster citizenship* in rural China. I build on Remes (2015) who conceptualises disaster citizenship based on his study of the practices deployed by survivors of the Salem Fire and the Halifax Explosion in early 20th century North America. In these cases, the survivors negotiated their rights and autonomy through 'everyday forms of solidarity' (p.10) under increasing state intervention. I develop the concept further by elaborating on the idea of 'solidarity of informal groups' to emphasise the alternative sources of solidarity that I could observe among citizens in rural China. I follow Remes' definition of solidarity as 'a horizontal, reciprocal care: a care for someone, or a fight for someone, or a connection with someone not out of charity or sympathy but out of identity and empathy' (2015: 10). In my case study, for instance, when facing state-led resettlement, villagers built solidarity in informal groups with existing social ties such as neighbourhoods to resist together. I follow Remes' use of the term 'informal group' to refer to families, neighbourhoods and kin, in contrast to formal groups in forms of institutionalised organisations. In this process, villagers reinforced or reproduced their sense of entitlement and strove for autonomy from state-led disaster governance for reconstruction.

In addition to state-led resettlement, I discuss two other aspects of state-led governance: management of public opinion and disaster recovery. Villagers of Water-Stone and Wood-Rock alike were concerned with the nature of disaster and state-led relief, which is relevant to the governance of public opinion. Villagers also worried about economic recovery and risk prevention, which relates to the governance of disaster recovery. In this article, I focus on these three aspects of disaster governance. In the next section, I examine state-led disaster governance and discuss the applicability of the analytical framework of 'disaster citizenship' and 'solidarity'.

Disaster Governance and Disaster Citizenship

I use 'state-led disaster governance' to describe the domination of the state in actual governing of various aspects of disaster management ranging from disaster relief, resettlement, economic recovery, risk

prevention and public opinion. Based upon existing literature and findings from my research, I identify two prominent aspects of state-led disaster governance: 1) advocating modernisation and 2) reproducing a moral state.

Urbanisation is a crucial component of state-advocated forms of modernisation (Lim 2023: 1048). To advocate modernisation, the state aligns disaster reconstruction with urbanisation either through resettlement to urban or suburban areas or through varied forms of economic recovery, such as tourism development (Sorace 2014; Zhang and Zhan 2021). The state also underscores modern technology and infrastructure in disaster management (The State Council 2017). In my research, the local government resettled Water-Stone villagers in the town seat, away from their native village. This illustrates the appropriation of disaster reconstruction with the aim of urbanisation for development.

In terms of the reproduction of a moral state, existing literature highlights the state's significant efforts to display compassion from leaders and promote gratitude among the affected population (Sorace 2014; Xu 2016; Zhang and Zhan 2021). I use the term 'moral state' to describe state strategies to legitimise its rule through morality. In my research, visits by leading officials to Water-Stone and moral critiques by local officials of villagers' lack of gratitude illustrate local government's emphasis on reproducing a moral state. Despite the state's ostensible goals of facilitating the disaster-affected population's disaster reconstruction, state-led disaster governance—guided by and reproduced in these practices of modernisation and morality—may not necessarily meet local needs. When either of these aspects encounters resistance, the state may resort to repression in its rigid sense of stability, regarding dissenting views and practices as sources of instability (Yu 2014: 77). For instance, scholars have observed media censorship of people's critiques of governments' lack of accountability behind school collapses during the Sichuan Earthquake (Xu 2016: 423). In my research, the local government repressed villagers' alternative views on the cause of the disaster by revoking relevant news reports containing such views.

I employ 'disaster citizenship' (Remes 2015) and 'solidarity' to analyse affected populations' responses towards disaster governance. Remes (2015) developed the concept of 'disaster citizenship' to elucidate local responses such as making claims to fulfil people's

rights or seeking autonomy from state control. He conducted historical research on the 1914 Salem fire and the 1917 Halifax explosion in the US and Canada, respectively, when emerging technocratic states heightened state governing of disaster rescue and relief. Although disaster governance varies across time and countries, the concept of 'disaster citizenship' is helpful. It focuses on state-society interaction from the perspective of disaster-affected populations and proves useful in examining local responses, as in the authoritarian context of China. In Remes' research, survivors negotiated their claims to official aid relief during periods of disaster rescue, temporary shelter and long-term relief. Survivors built everyday forms of solidarity from pre-existing connections with their families, neighbours, parishioners, priests, labour unions and donors from transnational diasporic communities. These forms of solidarity were rooted in geographical proximity, kinship ties and membership of social organisations, like religious parishes and labour unions. In the process, more survivors became conscious of their entitlement to state disaster relief and sought autonomy to minimise the state's intervention. For instance, in state-built shelters, survivors personalised their camps to create a sense of neighbourhood despite military disciplining and standardisation of survivors' camps. People's everyday forms of solidarity in their action invoke the ideas of rights and autonomy, without explicitly using these terms. In the field sites in China, villagers responded to state-led governance mainly within communities by building informal groups with families, neighbours and kin. What were their sources of solidarity and what affected their solidarity in the context of rural China? Did they develop disaster citizenship in terms of cultivating a sense of entitlement and autonomy? I address these questions in three empirical sections that follow a brief description of research methods.

Research Methods

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two flood-affected villages and one relocation site in eastern China between October 2020 and January 2021. The villages Water-Stone and Wood-Rock were impacted by flood in August 2019. Many Water-Stone villagers moved to new apartments in New Town soon after the flood, but the relocation

was still underway throughout the duration of my fieldwork. I refer to the resettled population as 'New Town villagers' to distinguish them from those who chose to remain in the villages. I refer to the latter as 'villagers in Water-Stone'. 'Water-Stone villagers' include both.

I engaged in participant observation at all three sites, conducting formal and informal interviews with the villagers, with people visiting the places and with personnel working on on-going infrastructure construction projects. In addition to participant observation, I carried out thirteen semi-structured interviews with previous and incumbent village committee cadres as well as officials at the town and county levels. I conducted digital follow-up interviews with village cadres in March 2022 to check if they had received any updated information regarding resettlement and reconstruction. I also collected data from government portals, news media and local archives to learn more about the state's policies and regulations related to natural disasters at different levels, and more specifically related to the Water-Stone/Wood-Rock disaster and my field sites through official records.

The field sites are single-surname villages, where most male villagers descend from the same patrilineal ancestry, and villagers usually preserve strong kinship ties for communal rituals. It is common to see village temples and ancestry halls in the region. According to Water-Stone villagers, the first ancestor came to this town almost a thousand years ago. The houses in both Water-Stone and Wood-Rock are built on a narrow stretch of land between the foothills, a river and a single main road—constructed by the county government—that follows the river as it connects the two villages to the town seat downstream. A provincial highway runs directly above the two villages along the side of the hills. Before the disaster, Water-Stone had a registered population of 472 residents, of which 120 individuals were permanent residents and the others worked or studied and resided in other places. During my stay in 2020, fewer than 40 villagers still resided there. A county bureau official discouraged my original plan to reside in Water-Stone during my field stay because it was considered a politically sensitive place. I stayed in Wood-Rock instead, and this change of plan expanded my field site to incorporate Wood-Rock.

The sense of political sensitivity affected my access to local officials, particularly when it came to the issue of resettlement. To minimise potential risks associated with my writing about individuals in the

field, I anonymise information that could expose village names, including references to documents released by the county government.

Bottom-up Legitimacy and Socioeconomic Justice

The Chinese government pays particular attention to the management of public opinion in disaster governance. The Ministry of Civil Affairs published an official interpretation of *The Emergency Response Law* in 2021, which emphasises the importance of controlling the release of information (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2021). It mentions fines and other forms of punishment that are imposed on people who make up or disseminate 'fake information' (*xujia xinxi*). In response to the Water-Stone/Wood-Rock disaster, the municipal government set up nine work teams, including one dedicated to 'guiding public opinion' (*xuanchuan yulun yindao*). With the existence of these directives in mind, in this section, I show how villagers asserted agency when negotiating their autonomy to express their opinions regarding both the cause of the disaster and the quality of government-led relief and when articulating their expectations of the Chinese government.

The state-led disaster governance illustrates the government's efforts to reproduce a moral state. The landslide blocked the county road connecting Water-Stone to the outside world. According to a report published in the provincial news daily, despite the obvious access difficulties, the provincial Party Secretary immediately visited the village by walking down the highway above it. The provincial Party Secretary comforted Water-Stone's Party Secretary and villagers, stating that 'the merciless natural disaster brings about the warmth of humanity' (*tianzai wuqing ren youqing*). This, and similar phrases, were repeated in other publications, such as the People's Net (*renmin wang*), an online version of the largest party-state newspaper. In New Town, the local government built a cultural hall where the government exhibited state and societal efforts in different phases of disaster reconstruction. The phrase mentioned above also figured prominently in the exhibition. The state thus produced and reproduced the moral state by conveying its compassion towards the disaster-affected population.

However, in emphasising its compassion, the government obscured the underlying causes of the Water-Stone/Wood-Rock disaster. A geological survey and analysis report published almost two years

after the flood in June 2021 stated that extreme rainfall and construction activities were the major triggers of the disaster. When, right after the disaster, several villagers had claimed that the highway was responsible for the landslide, however, such opinions had been suppressed. One county official recalled how a news report had included an unnamed villager's attribution of the landslide to the construction of the highway, but this report was later removed. The local government closely followed the provincial Party Secretary's official statement that repeatedly framed the disaster as 'heaven-sent', and any alternative opinions were regarded as sources of instability and required repression.

Nonetheless, villagers did not acquiesce, and they expressed their communal opinions in informal groups. Some villagers echoed state rhetoric in highlighting the heavy rain. Nonetheless, villagers discussed and exchanged views not necessarily in line with the state-promoted narrative. It was common to see villagers gather on doorsteps, in front of stores, while walking down the road or crossing the bridge. It was routine for villagers to socialise with fellow residents in these gathering sites to greet each other, gossip and exchange information. During these informal gatherings, villagers chatted about the disaster and exchanged their views with construction workers, truck drivers and the researcher.

Thus, the villagers built a solidarity by expressing their communal views through existing neighbourhood ties despite a shared sense of resignation facing state coercion. A local store owner, Uncle Su, who had returned to Wood-Rock a decade earlier, argued that 'the provincial government said that the disaster was heaven-sent. No one dared to say [otherwise]; [the government] meant for the [villagers] to shut up'. A similar sentiment was expressed by Aunt Zhu who lives with her husband in Wood-Rock Village. When we chatted about the flood, her husband stated that villagers were not allowed to attribute the landslide to the highway. In a serious tone, Aunt Zhu quickly added that anyone who did would 'be arrested' (*zhuaqilai*). Nevertheless, villagers derived a sense of legitimacy in building their communal opinions. Aunt Bai's house was damaged during the flood, and she was rebuilding her house with her husband Uncle Bai, a retired county official. They planned to return to live in Wood-Rock. Aunt Bai was active in socialising with her kin and fellow villagers at these everyday gathering sites, and she emphasised that 'everyone said that; it was not just words but the fact'.

Villagers' connections were reinforced by the shared experience of repression. Their solidarity was strengthened by the sense of legitimacy from bottom-up, rooted in their informal groups of fellow villagers. In Remes' research, survivors legitimised their demands for state relief through donors with whom they had close ties. Donors could directly influence state rules or do so through donors' association. The bottom-up legitimacy of Water-Stone and Wood-Rock villagers was constrained under state repression. Although they could not change governmental responses, they still acquired some sense of autonomy despite state suppression of alternative opinions.

Regarding disaster relief, the state emphasised that the proper attitude from villagers should be 'gratitude' (*gan'en*). According to statistics of societal donations exhibited in the cultural hall in New Town, private donations came primarily from overseas Chinese communities, totalling approximately RMB 22 million. However, many villagers stressed that they 'had not received a single penny from the government'. A medicinal Chinese herb picker, Uncle Yaozhong, complained to me that the local government was 'without conscience' (*meiyou liangxin*) because they had withheld donations for Water-Stone villagers to repair damaged furniture, doors and windows. Villagers were dissatisfied that their practical needs were not met, and the governmental officials disregarded villagers' dissatisfaction by giving moral critiques, if not direct repression. For instance, one county official who came to Water-Stone to supervise the village election remarked to me that Water-Stone villagers bore grudges against the government and were selfish and ungrateful.

Wood-Rock villagers were also dissatisfied with the lack of government-led relief efforts allocated to them. Like Water-Stone, many households suffered property loss when the flood washed away their belongings. Uncle Su commented that they had received no help from any level of government, not even any written or verbal consolation. He added what he observed elsewhere that 'even when a piece of land was flooded, there were subsidies'. He complained that the government did not care about their life or death (*buguan sihuo)*. Uncle Bai had reported his losses—including his damaged house—but the reply he received from the local government was that 'yours is a trivial issue' (*ni zhege dou shi xiaoshi*). He remarked, 'compared to Water-Stone which suffered from dozens of deaths, mine was no big deal'. He added that his loss,

nevertheless, was something for the government to deal with. Like Water-Stone, Wood-Rock villagers recognized their entitlement to receive disaster relief from the state.

Besides existing social ties, the shared sense of entitlement among the villagers increased their connections in building solidarity behind these counter-discourses. This shared sense of entitlement is rooted in a sense of socioeconomic justice. Perry (2008) examines the entrenched social convention emphasising collective socioeconomic justice or social rights in China. She finds that not only political leaders reproduce this convention in underscoring economic development, but protesters also tend to frame their resistance through 'a moral claim to subsistence' (*ibid*. p. 44). Although Water-Stone and Wood-Rock villagers did not protest openly, they similarly voiced their opinions that state-led disaster relief did not meet their basic livelihood needs. In Remes' (2015) historical research, disaster-affected populations developed this sense of entitlement during disasters, transitioning from regarding state-provided relief as charity to understanding it as their right. In Water-Stone and Wood-Rock, villagers defied state control over public opinion and established a long-lasting sense of entitlement to socioeconomic justice that helped reinforce their connections and solidarity. These connections helped preserve some sense of autonomy among the villagers and allowed them to cultivate new expectations of disaster relief in meeting their needs.

The gaps between how the state and the villagers understood the moral state, along with repression by the local governments or perceived ignorance by the state, increased the connections between villagers through shared dissatisfaction and resignation at the communal level. Their sense of legitimacy from bottom up regarding their counter-discourses and a shared sense of socioeconomic justice strengthened their solidarity to utter their opinions in informal groups. In this process, they reinforced and reproduced their sense of entitlement regarding disaster relief to meet their needs and preserved their sense of autonomy by expressing their opinions on the causes of the disaster to demand accountability and state-led disaster relief. Their practices through the solidarity of informal groups constitute a form of disaster citizenship.

Sense of 'Rightful' and Divided Connections

Before Water-Stone villagers could alleviate the pain of loss and take action, the local government had already decided how and where to reconstruct the village. Within a week after the flood, the county government produced a relocation plan. According to news released on the governmental portal, the county Bureau of Housing and Construction organised meetings with town and village cadres and village representatives to disseminate the plan. The county Communist Party branch coordinated with government officials to advocate the relocation policy, to collect questions from the villagers and to report them to the leaders. To motivate villagers to move, the local government provided additional benefits like additional compensation of several thousand yuan to villagers who signed on to move during the first month after the disaster; slightly more than half of the households were reported to have done so. Nevertheless, after two years, around 15 per cent of households remained in Water-Stone. In this section, I show how villagers endeavoured to stay in their locations and how they legitimised their refusal to relocate.

The relocation plan was consistent with the state's overall plan to urbanise for modernisation. Five months after issuing the relocation plan, the county government drafted more specific 'Measures for Implementation of Ecological Migration' ('Migration Measures' hereafter). The measures described the relocation as ecological migration (*shengtai banqian*), because it related to geological disaster avoidance. It also aimed to increase construction land use quota in an urban area for urbanised development and modernisation through concentrated resettlements (*jizhong anzhi*) by grouping resettled villagers in one compact apartment compound. Resettling Water-Stone villagers out of their native village allowed the government to convert land occupied by villagers' damaged houses back into agricultural land. The government could then transfer the construction land use quota saved in Water-Stone to urban areas. By aligning concentrated resettlement for disaster reconstruction with urbanisation, the 'Migration Measures' show that state-led disaster governance also serves to fulfil the state's goal of increasing urbanisation.

Resettlement away from the native village did not necessarily meet the needs of all villagers. Socioeconomic factors were paramount in the decision by villagers in Water-Stone not to move. Some had

recently rebuilt their houses and could not afford another debt to purchase new apartments even with subsidies. Some relied on their living places in the villages as means for economic production, such as bee keeping, bamboo chair making, and other handicraft-based activities. Yizhu Jie, whose husband worked in the bamboo craft business, reasoned that it would be difficult to keep their practices in the concentrated residential area, let alone take on the increased expenditure for daily life in the apartment compound. One male party member in New Town commented that only half of the villagers had left voluntarily. Uncle Yaozhong recounted how the local government 'deceived' (*pian*) and forced them to relocate. His son ran a business, and the local government devised various ways to coerce the family to relocate, including by threatening to close his son's factory. Though some villagers refused to move, it was difficult for them to openly confront the local government.

Instead, villagers in Water-Stone formed informal groups to share their stance on not relocating. Uncle Lizu used to be a village cadre, and villagers often gathered at his home to exchange opinions. I observed a group of villagers in Water-Stone gathered in his house to play mah-jong and to discuss the compensation policy during the game. A young female college student commented that with fewer villagers, they had to be more 'united' (*tuanjie*). According to Water-Stone villagers, the local government held a meeting and assured villagers that those who chose not to move could stay. Nevertheless, the local government continued to pressure villagers to move.

In addition to their existing ties and shared connections, villagers enhanced their solidarity to resist through official discourses during state-led disaster governance. Uncle Lizu quoted a line uttered by the provincial Party Secretary on his visit to the village: 'Rebuild the village to be the top new village of the province'. He then accused the local governments of manipulating official statements to suit their own intentions: he claimed that the local government redefined 'rebuilding' to mean 'relocation for the sake of land development'. To town officials trying to persuade the remaining villagers in Water-Stone to relocate before the second-round lottery, Uncle Lizu voiced his opinion that if villagers decided not to move, officials had no 'authority' (*shiquan*) to enforce their relocation, and villagers did not have to articulate their reasons. O'Brien and Li (2006: 2) theorised 'rightful resistance' to illuminate the actions that rural activists take to seek redress by resorting to policies, central directives and

official discourses in temporary alliances with elites and popular support. Though without using the term 'right' (*quanli*), it is common to observe villagers in China utilising official discourses to legitimise their resistance (see also, Brandtstädter 2011; Hansen and Liu 2018). Similarly, Water-Stone villagers resorted to official discourses to legitimise their solidarity in resisting the implementation of resettlement.

However, state-led governance could also divide the villagers to impact their solidarity. In the 'Migration Measures' the compensation was based on a calculation of the maximum size of apartments for a resettled household: the original homestead land size multiplied either by three, by the size of the original house or by the maximum legal size of 30 square metres per household member. This government-led calculation and compensation on paper corresponded to what villagers experienced in practice. The compensation was calculated based on the housing structure, which was then evaluated and categorised accordingly. The policy based on housing conditions divided villagers between those with houses intact and those whose houses were washed away in the flood.

Those villagers who lost their homes in Water-Stone, such as Uncle Chebao, demanded reconstruction of their houses in Water-Stone. Uncle Chebao shared with his brothers a house that was built by their parents but was washed away in the flood. He disagreed with how the same policy applied to houses that were damaged and to those that were not. Uncle Chebao and his brothers also lost their parents in the flood, but the 'disaster aid fund for the deceased' (*fuweijin*) could only be accessed after he or his brothers purchased an apartment. Funds could then be used to deduct from the full price of the apartment. He claimed in 2023 that he submitted his petition before the end of 2020, and he was uncertain whether he would receive any response to his questions. Uncle Chebao and his brothers had claims different from villagers with intact houses. He and his brothers were not included in the informal groups, like the one at Uncle Lizu's house. In Uncle Chebao's words, 'they have houses in the village, and they don't understand [and do not care about my situation]'. For him and his brothers, it was difficult to gain support from villagers in Water-Stone and New Town. The relocation policies of standardised compensation revolved around housing for villagers with divided needs and thus two different claims. The existing ties as neighbours and the connections tied to

empathy to remain in their native village for disaster reconstruction were overshadowed by state-led resettlement. Their informal group was thus divided, undermining their solidarity. The state-led disaster governance affected villagers' solidarity, reshaping the boundaries of informal groups in which they united, cared and resisted together.

Building on Remes' (2015) findings on disaster-affected populations' appropriation of existing social ties to make claims, such as demanding disaster relief through donors, this study shows that the ties and solidarity can be either strengthened or undermined. The official discourses during state-led governance in Water-Stone and Wood-Rock reinforced villagers' sense of legitimacy in their solidarity to resist through informal groups building upon existing ties. However, resettlement policies also affected their solidarity in terms of whom to align with. Nonetheless, facing state-led resettlement that did not meet their livelihood needs, villagers in Water-Stone reasserted a sense of autonomy to address their practical needs, albeit within different informal groups. In this process, villagers could develop a new sense of entitlement. For example, Uncle Chebao told me that he questioned the transparency of the use of donations and the specific policies on village resettlement in his petition. While they resisted within the system, as seen from Uncle Lizu's references to official discourses and Uncle Chebao's petition, the solidarity of informal groups among the villagers invoked ideas of rights and autonomy. Their decisions on where to live in order to maintain their ways of life constitute disaster citizenship.

Routines and Rituals

I visited New Town for the first time in 2020. The first thing I noticed were brand-new apartments with white facades and black tiled roofs. On part of the building walls facing the main road was painted an image of a smiling peasant, joyful from the harvest. In addition to building new apartment compounds for resettlement, the county government demolished the original houses of villagers who agreed to move, regardless of the conditions of the structures. Water-Stone villagers told me that all construction activities in the disaster-ridden area were prohibited for a period of five years after the demolition of houses. In March 2022, the newly emptied land was still under dispute over its future use. The government

implemented landslide and mudslide prevention to reduce risk in the disaster-affected villages; however, it ignored the desires of local villagers to participate in risk reduction and prevention. In this section, I discuss how villagers negotiated their autonomy in order to resume their livelihoods and regain a sense of control over disaster recovery.

State-led disaster recovery illustrated the state's goals of modernisation through urbanisation, modern technology and infrastructure. The State Council issued a comprehensive disaster prevention and reduction plan for the period between 2016 and 2020 (State Council 2017). This plan highlights the state's commitment to building a safer, post-disaster space for 'more well-being' (*geng meihao*). At the county level, the final version of the 'Migration Measures' was released in November 2021. It states that resettlement should ensure that villagers are 'able to move, to settle down and to thrive' (*bandechu, wendezhu, fudeqi*). In the exhibitions inside the cultural hall in New Town, the town government presented its plan to develop cultural tourism and an e-commerce platform to facilitate the sales of agricultural products by local farmers. When it came to disaster risk prevention and reduction, the government had not engaged with villagers about changing their physical environment. In Water-Stone, the government had implemented landslide and mudslide prevention measures by consolidating and cementing the damaged slopes. In Wood-Rock, the government cemented several mudslide slopes, built concrete and net walls to block falling stones and evacuated the clinic building damaged by the mudslide. However, these state-led measures were perceived by villagers as inadequate and not meeting villagers' needs.

Villagers wanted to participate in the recovery of New Town and the disaster-affected villages, but they were usually excluded from state-led disaster recovery measures. In New Town, the new cultural hall as a public space was supposed to fulfil multiple functions as a space for village meetings, entertainment and education. In practice, it was primarily used as a space to receive visitors from different levels of government. A vice village-head in New Town complained that the villagers could not use the cultural hall because its keys were in the hands of town officials. In another apartment building in New Town, a private processing plant occupied the ground floor after some villagers had moved into the upper floors. Only a

few women worked in the processing plant. The village's Party Secretary and several villagers remarked that the wages in the processing plan were too low, only 30 to 40 RMB for seven to eight hours of work, which was 'less than the cost to eat'. Villagers had not been involved in the promised e-commerce platform, launched in New Town in 2020. By March 2022, the status of the platform remained unclear to New Town villagers. Without property ownership of the ground floor, villagers received no rent income, neither from the processing plant nor from the e-commerce platform. They had no choices in which businesses to develop. The government's urban planning of the New Town space systematically excluded villagers and overlooked their needs.

Likewise, although the state called for public participation in disaster risk monitoring and reporting (State Council Office 2017), in practice, villagers were mainly excluded from state-led risk prevention. Water-Stone villager Mowen Jie is a village grid worker (*wanggeyuan*). Grid workers gather and report intelligence from their respective assigned units under an administrative village to upper levels of government, constituting part of grassroots governance (Xu and He 2022). Mowen Jie commented on her role as the 'running leg of the government' (*gei zhengfu paotui*). She told me that she had already reported the issue of piled-up stones in the river but had not received any response. Villagers faced risks in their housing locations, but the local government dismissed their inputs on the issues; villagers could only passively observe the engineering measures taken by the government.

Despite the government's full control of the planning and management of place, villagers in both New Town and Water-Stone actively engaged with their respective surroundings to meet their various needs. In New Town, villagers resumed daily routines such as making bonfires on the empty ground in the compound, sitting on bamboo chairs and playing cards with fellow villagers. However, villagers also had to adapt some of their routine practices to the new environment. One New Town villager sighed when reporting that some households complained about the smoke from the bonfires. He explained that the residential space was narrower compared to their native village, and thus neighbours could be easily affected. Some of them were able to rely on personal networks to access farmland in a nearby village or to grow vegetables around their new

apartments. Women followed the tradition of making hand-made noodles in the empty corridor on the ground floor or on the pavement. In Water-Stone—although villagers were forbidden to use newly vacated land for construction—people did not leave the space of concrete and tiled remains of demolished houses empty. Instead, they used the space for productive activities like broom making, bee keeping and vegetable planting. In resuming these productive and social activities, villagers renewed an unarticulated mutual agreement on the uses of place and re-established their routine culture. Downing and Garcia-Downing (2009: 228) elaborate upon the term 'routine culture' to refer to the process by which a sense of order and control is restored through repeating the co-presence of people at a certain place and time. Through collective routine activities, the villagers transformed the urban spaces in New Town and the newly emptied spaces in Water-Stone into places invested with meanings of productivity and sociality.

Furthermore, villagers had their own way of regaining a sense of control of their place, including risk. According to villagers and local Daoist priests, during the ancestry hall reconstruction, villagers needed to conduct the ritual of staging local opera, or the village would not be 'peaceful' (*taiping*; *pingan*). In Water-Stone, the village's ancestry hall was reconstructed only two years before the flood. Despite the relocation of many Water-Stone villagers, they still decided to continue performing the rituals. Uncle Lizu managed the preparations for this and other rituals of 'doing good deeds' (*zuo haoshi*) to mourn the deceased in the landslide and flood. Villagers in both Water-Stone and New Town gathered funds to prepare offerings for the rituals. The rituals spanned a total of six days, including three days of local opera performance and three days for the mourning rituals. Water-Stone became alive again and fulfilled its ritual obligations to follow customs to not disrupt village peace. During the mourning rituals, Daoist priests wrote down the names of villagers who passed away in the flood as well as texts expressing wishes for peace. The mourning rituals included a procession by a Daoist preacher group who patrolled the whole village and stopped at the village temple before returning to the hall and signalling the end of the rituals with firecrackers. Yang (2020: 269) depicts the 'ritual expression of locality and community' inspired by both religion and lineage as seen from the centrality attached to sacred sites for ancestors and gods as well as processions

to demarcate community boundaries. Despite the small-scale and informal nature of the rituals as people mobilised for the village temple, shrines and halls for ancestors in my study, they were all expressions of similar territorialising relations with local places.

Villagers revived informal groups through the resumption and reproduction of routine and ritual practices, aiming to regain a sense of control over post-disaster life amid state-led disaster recovery. Remes (2015) highlights efforts by survivors to recreate order, such as personalising tents to rebuild a sense of neighbourhood in the disciplined shelter camping sites managed by the state. In this way, survivors can continue their social life. In the state's transformation of space for short-term or long-term recovery, disaster-affected populations try to make their places out of such space. Space can become a place when it 'acquires definition and meaning' (Tuan 1977: 136). For the villagers in my study, their connections manifested in unarticulated rules of routines in using public space in their native village, not only for social but also for productive activities. In resuming post-disaster life, villagers built solidarity on existing social ties embodied through routines for social and economic relationships. When it comes to mourning and solidarity in caring with and for fellow residents, according to Remes (2015), disaster-affected populations build solidarity through connections of shared empathy and ties bound by membership of institutionalised or formal religious organisations. In my study, kinship ties and spiritual bonds were closely bound to village-place over generations of residence.

The solidarity of informal groups rests on existing social ties embodied through routines and rituals. In villages where people have lived for generations, social ties can be informal as place-bound and intermingle social and productive relations inside the village. It remains to see how such place-based ties and solidarity may evolve after villagers relocate and separate into two locations for a longer span of time. During the rituals, Water-Stone villagers reinforced communal solidarity and reproduced autonomy by restoring a sense of control over place, constituting an essential aspect of disaster citizenship.

Conclusion

In this article, I present how disaster-affected villagers responded to three aspects of state-led disaster governance. Their responses mainly came through informal groups at the communal level due to, on the one hand, the dominant existing social ties as families, neighbours and kin and, on the other hand, the state's repression when villagers had counterviews or showed resistance. Without openly confronting the government, villagers expressed their communal opinions about the state's control of public opinion. The villagers resisted relocation and regained a sense of control over their places through reinstating social, economic and spiritual routines. In this process, they reinforced and reproduced a sense of entitlement through socioeconomic justice and new expectations of disaster relief to suit their needs. Whether villagers resettled or not, they cultivated a sense of autonomy on their own terms, including in opinions on the cause of the disaster, by making places for economic recovery and risk prevention out of space meant for modernisation by the state. I thus argue that villagers were practising disaster citizenship.

I suggest that the ways villagers practised disaster citizenship are best understood through what I call 'solidarity of informal groups'. Grounded in historical research, Remes (2015) studied disaster citizenship in North America and underscored the role of the survivors' everyday formal and informal ties in their responses to disaster and state-led rescue and relief to raise the idea of 'everyday forms of solidarity'. In the context of rural China, I also observed the role of existing social ties as crucial sources of solidarity but additionally noticed the source of a shared sense of entitlement to socioeconomic justice in long-term interactions with the state. Furthermore, existing ties between villagers could manifest in place-based identity in rituals and routines not only for social but also for productive activities in the use of communal place. On the other hand, their existing ties and solidarities could be enhanced or undermined by state-led disaster governance. Remes (2015) focused on how disaster-affected people politically appropriated these existing ties to make claims over disaster relief. In my research, disaster governance could become both a source of connections but also of constraints. In terms of new connections to fuel solidarity, the shared experience of the unsatisfactory state-led disaster governance and of repression followed by a sense of resignation reinforced villagers' connections in informal groups. Such informal

groups reproduced a sense of legitimacy from the bottom up in justifying their solidarity to express counter-discourses on the nature of the disaster. Villagers could also derive a sense of 'rightfulness' through official discourses to further legitimise their solidarity to resist state-led resettlement. Regarding constraints, their solidarities to seek autonomy over public opinion could be limited at the communal level because of state repression. Their existing ties were divided by policies that produced differentiated interests and claims among villagers under the standardised housing compensation policies; this reshaped solidarities in terms of who resisted what together. The state-led resettlement that separated Water-Stone villagers between two locations could affect their existing ties, connections and solidarity in place-bound routines and rituals.

I thus introduce 'solidarity of informal groups' to contribute to studies on state-society interactions during disasters in general and provide an additional analytical tool to study the practices of local actors in China. It helps with conceptualising the agency of disaster-affected populations in their interactions with the state and other societal groups over the course of disaster. Further research can explore their interactions not only with fellow villagers but also with village cadres and village committees, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play during state-led disaster governance. In the authoritarian context of China, 'solidarity of informal groups' emphasises the impact of state-led disaster governance on villagers' practices. During state-led disaster governance, villagers are likely to respond in forms of informal groups, and their existing ties and solidarities on whether and how to fight, care or connect with others are both strengthened and constrained. However, the solidarity of informal groups of villagers also seems to contribute to affecting governmental responses. More research is needed to explore the concrete effects of solidarity of informal groups on disaster governance. Further research could also explore the applicability of the 'solidarity of informal groups' of local actors facing other types of governance and whether the practices of disaster citizenship observed here differ from other modes of citizenship.

The practices of the villagers in Water-Stone and Wood-Rock invoke ideas of rights and autonomy, even without direct articulations of 'citizen' (*gongmin*) and 'rights' (*quanli*). Nonetheless, this research demonstrates the ways that a disaster-affected population

creates and pursues justice and autonomy in their direct and indirect interactions and negotiations with the government during disaster.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was generously funded by the Research Council of Norway (grant number 301352) and the University of Oslo. I also acknowledge support from my current institution of affiliation, Zhejiang Yuexiu University.

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NOTES

1 To preserve anonymity, no information that exposes the location of my field site nor the identities of my interlocutors is given—names of all places and people are pseudonyms. Since the villages are of one or just a few surnames, I add first name pseudonyms to distinguish individuals from one another. I use 'Uncle' and 'Aunt' to refer to villagers in the age cohort above 60 years and I use 'Jie' in the names for women in their the 30's and 40's (literally 'Older Sister'). I separate Water-Stone villagers from Wood-Rock villagers by using two-character first names to refer to the former, and a single first name to name the latter.

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