

Policy Forum 08-047: Wenchuan as Eco-City



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By Emanuel Pastreich and John Feffer

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I. Introduction

Emanuel Pastreich, Director of the Asia Institute at the SolBridge School of Business in Daejeon, South Korea and a senior fellow at the US-Japan-China Comparative Policy Research Institute (CPRI), and John Feffer, the co-director of Foreign Policy In Focus at the Institute for Policy Studies, write, "In that spirit of compassion, let us rebuild Wenchuan, the victim of an act of nature, with an eye toward rebuilding all of our cities, the victims of our blind embrace of unsustainable growth."

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II. Article by Emanuel Pastreich and John Feffer

- "Wenchuan as Eco-City"

By Emanuel Pastreich and John Feffer

A devastating earthquake leveled the Chinese town of Wenchuan, leaving in its wake over 60,000 dead and five million homeless throughout Sichuan province. It will take years to heal the damage of this tragedy. Nevertheless, even as aid organizations and local governments scramble to erect temporary housing and supply drinking water, it is important to step back and consider how the international community can properly contribute long after the last rescue crew has left.

First of all, today's China is a very different place from the country that suffered a major earthquake 30 years ago. In 1976, China was largely closed to the world, despite a rapprochement with the United States. As Wenran Jiang, senior fellow at the Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada, notes, China has opened itself up to the world, accepting international rescue and medical teams to an unprecedented degree.

"But for a tectonic shift to occur in the world's perception of China as a new kind of superpower," he writes, "Beijing needs to do more than demonstrate that its crisis management is better than Burma's or that post-earthquake Sichuan is no post-Katrina New Orleans."

One way for China to prove that it is a new kind of superpower is to do something that goes beyond simply rebuilding Wenchuan. It can make a virtue out of necessity and, with outside assistance, leapfrog over existing technologies to create a new kind of city.

Such a transformation in the face of adversity is not unique. For instance, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 killed a similar number of people. That tragedy led to the development of the science of seismology. King Joseph of Portugal rebuilt Lisbon as a grand city boasting the first buildings with earthquake-resistant designs. Lisbon's Pombaline district from that era of regeneration remains a tourist attraction today.

China can do Portugal one better. With international help, it can rebuild Wenchuan as an eco-city of energy efficiency and green commonsense that can inspire the world - like the Colombian eco-village of Gaviotas for the 21st century. Such an eco-city can be a model of sustainable development that points beyond the contradictions of economic growth based on energy consumption.

Wenchuan could draw admirers just as Curitiba in Brazil does for its excellent public transportation and environmental urban planning. Such a tribute to the earthquake's victims, by implementing solutions that can save the planet, would be more fitting than any plaque or monument.

China has already shown itself to be open to the establishment of eco-cities. Dongtan island, near Shanghai, is an ambitious effort to create a next-generation low-energy-consumption community powered by sustainable energy and organized by the Shanghai Industrial Investment Corporation.

Built by the global engineering firm ARUP, Dongtan will feature extensive local organic farming that will make it food self-sufficient. Its public transportation will be powered by hydrogen fuel cells, and its carbon footprint will be virtually nonexistent. By doing something similar inland, China can transform not only how it approaches the environment but, because of how important China is to the global picture, how the world deals with climate change.

The recreation of Wengchuan as an eco-city could rely on an already extensive regional network of environmental cooperation. South Korea signed environmental cooperation agreements with both China and Japan in 1993. The Sino-Japan Friendship Center for Environmental Protection has been around for more than a decade. In particular, Japan has been working with China to control the latter's air pollution.

Japanese cities, too, have established sister-city relations with their Chinese counterparts, which has served as a conduit for transferring technology and know-how. When Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Japan in early May, his tour of a state-of-the-art recycling plant prompted a request for cutting-edge Japanese technology to address China's environmental problems.

Wenchuan could raise regional cooperation to the next level. Japanese technology, South Korean funding, and the support of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia could all play important roles. Taiwan, too, could earmark special funds as part of a newly unfolding economic relationship with the mainland.

But Wenchuan should not simply be a showcase. It must be sustainable and replicable. Much as Habitat for Humanity builds affordable housing for the poor around the world, the Wenchuan model must be workable not only where there are blank slates but also in existing cities. To deal effectively and honestly with the challenges of pollution, climate change, and energy inefficiency, we must focus our efforts on the neglected regions of the world where the struggle for economic growth trumps all other concerns.

Using hybrid automobiles in wealthy countries or installing more efficient refrigerators, while necessary, is not nearly enough. Funding from wealthy countries must help cities like Wenchuan meet the new global standards for reducing carbon emissions.

If the Cold War was about the threat of nuclear war and massive ideological conflict, the environmental struggle today is about regaining harmony between nature and human development. President John F Kennedy asserted his solidarity with the people of Berlin when he said in 1961, "Two thousand years ago the proudest boast was *civis romanus sum* [I am a Roman citizen]. Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is *Ich bin ein Berliner* [I am a citizen of Berlin]. All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words *Ich bin ein Berliner* !"

In the spirit of the new age of environmentalism, let us update Kennedy's famous words. Let us say today *Wo shi Wenchuan de Shimin* (I am a citizen of Wenchuan). In that spirit of compassion, let us rebuild Wenchuan, the victim of an act of nature, with an eye toward rebuilding all of our cities, the victims of our blind embrace of unsustainable growth.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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