

## The 'Chinese way'?

### The evolution of Chinese humanitarianism

Hanna B. Krebs



#### Key messages

- Shaped by its own history of humanitarianism as well as its particular cultural values, China boasts its own, distinctive humanitarian identity.
- While China has taken a distinctive approach to humanitarian action, the country is becoming more pragmatic and accepting of international norms. Current spending on humanitarian action is relatively small, but is set to increase in the future.
- Increased dialogue with other bilateral and multilateral humanitarian institutions, joint training for Chinese and international aid experts and institutionalised communication channels with China will be useful in bridging differences and enhancing collaboration in humanitarian action.

The economic and political rise of China has gone hand in hand with the country's expanding role in the international humanitarian sphere. China's growing integration into the multilateral humanitarian architecture has dovetailed with increasing contributions following major disasters, including the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, the Kashmir earthquake in 2005 and Cyclone Nargis in 2008. China was the largest humanitarian donor among the BRIC countries, providing \$87 million in humanitarian assistance in 2011.

At the same time, there is a widely held view that China does not always behave as a responsible power should, or play a role proportionate to its economic heft. Analysis of China's humanitarian activities often emphasises a divide between the country and 'the West', and is often critical of China's perceived failure to adhere to established norms and practices within the humanitarian field. China is often depicted as inherently different from Western countries in its approach. While there is some truth in this, in engaging with China it is crucial to understand

Hanna B. Krebs is a Research Officer at the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG).

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Humanitarian Policy Group  
Overseas Development Institute  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399  
E-mail: [hpgadmin@odi.org.uk](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org.uk)  
Website: <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg>

Jyekundo Earthquake, Yushu, Qinghai, China  
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## NATURAL DISASTERS: A COSMIC RETRIBUTION

The concept of imperial responsibility was reinforced by the ancient Chinese idea of a cosmic link between natural disasters and human conduct which long predated Confucianism. The Chinese term for natural disasters, *tianzai* (天災), literally means 'heavenly disaster', and conveys the traditional interpretation of natural calamities as a form of divine retribution: Heaven's punishment for immoral human behaviour, its extent and severity depending on the social importance of the miscreant. As such, the emperor's conduct was of pre-eminent importance.

not only how China approaches humanitarian action, but also why it has taken a different path. Shaped by its own history of humanitarianism as well as its particular cultural values, China boasts its own, distinctive 'humanitarian' identity. Understanding this identity will be instrumental in helping other, particularly Western, humanitarian figures and institutions engage with China on humanitarian issues.

### 'Humanitarianism' in Chinese history

Humanitarianism as a concept and practice is deeply ingrained in China's history. Confucian notions of benevolence and universal love in particular permeated traditional Chinese philanthropy for centuries, exercised first as a privilege of the elite, and later by broader sections of Chinese society.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, however, it is the Confucian notion of a harmonious world order guaranteed by the dual ideal of responsibility and legitimacy that has shaped Chinese humanitarian thought and action. On an individual level, every member of society had a clearly defined responsibility according to his or her status, as well as an obligation to be obedient to their social superiors. The emperor, understood as the ultimate moral benefactor at the top of this social hierarchy, was in turn responsible for protecting his people in times of disaster. The government's capacity to alleviate suffering effectively translated into its legitimacy to rule, known as the 'Mandate of Heaven'. As popular

dissent against a government could and often did result in the end of a dynasty, the emperor constantly sought the moral approval of his people by fulfilling his responsibilities to the best of his ability.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, while the Western understanding of humanitarianism is based on the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, China's notion of the same has always been shaped by the Confucian ideals of responsibility and state legitimacy.

Throughout the centuries, China's indigenous philanthropy laid the foundation for its humanitarianism. It was also complemented by long exchanges with Western missionaries and other humanitarian actors, some of whom had a long-established presence in China. However, China's attitude towards the international community was greatly affected by events from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, when imperial China's defeats at the hands of foreign powers resulted in unequal treaties and territorial concessions. This painful historical experience led the country to develop strong concepts of state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, which are visible to this day. These were enshrined in Mao Zedong's 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' and formed the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy. Under Mao, China's understanding of 'humanitarianism' was also transformed: rather than protecting the Chinese people after disasters, it now meant improving living standards by means of an egalitarian community at home, and support for proletarian revolutions abroad, with China as the guardian of the Third World against the capitalist West.

### China's humanitarian engagement today

China's growing international role and economic power has yet to be reflected in the volume of its humanitarian assistance: over the decade from 2000, China ranked 30 among donor countries, giving less than a quarter of the humanitarian assistance provided by Luxembourg, a country of half a million people. At \$27m in 2012, China's international humanitarian assistance amounted to 0.0004% of the country's gross national income (GNI), the lowest share among the 30 largest bilateral donors that year.<sup>3</sup> China's humanitarian aid is also

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1 J. Smith, *The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

2 S. Lei and Y. Tong, *Social Protest in Contemporary China, 2003–2010: Transitional Pains and Regime Legitimacy* (London: Routledge, 2014).

3 Global Humanitarian Assistance, *GHA Report 2013*, Development Initiatives, 2013.

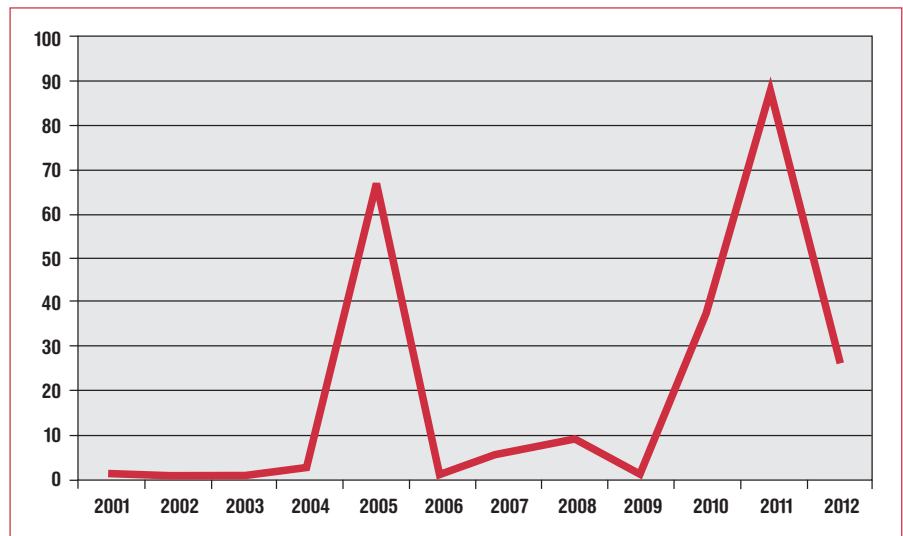
marked by significant fluctuations, peaking in 2005 when the country provided relief to Asian countries affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami, but rapidly declining again the following year. In 2011 there was another rise in aid, half of which went to Ethiopia and Kenya.

Disagreements with Western countries have surfaced in discourses around aid giving. China's aid programme has been criticised for its infrastructure-based and state-centric approach, which tends to bypass a wider range of civil society actors.

Similarly, there is a perception that the country's development cooperation programme in Africa and Latin America is closely linked to its pursuit of natural resources. Chinese aid to states such as Sudan or Zimbabwe is also seen as driven by economic motives,<sup>4</sup> or criticised in the West for sustaining autocratic regimes and retarding progress on human rights.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, however, China's increasing engagement with international structures, including channelling humanitarian aid through multilateral mechanisms, indicates a strong normative change in aid policy and practice. Unlike in earlier periods, when state responsibility and legitimacy had rested on domestic disaster assistance, the rise of China as a global power has expanded this concept abroad, and international prestige has become an important new source of legitimacy for the Chinese state. Apart from growing aid giving, the country has also opened itself up to foreign aid following disasters. When a major earthquake devastated large parts of Sichuan Province in western China in 2008, for example, the government granted almost unlimited access to affected areas to foreign and domestic aid workers. This is in marked contrast to the Mao era, when foreign disaster assistance was regularly rejected.

**FIGURE 1: CHINA'S HUMANITARIAN AID IN US\$ MILLION**



Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS)

Differences with the West can also emerge with respect to humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Memories of Western assaults on China's sovereignty in the nineteenth century contribute to the country's reservations about foreign interventionism, which in turn has seen the country accused by the international community of being uncooperative or overly insistent on the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. One stark example is China's vetoes relating to Syria (four in total), which have been criticised by Western governments and human rights advocates.

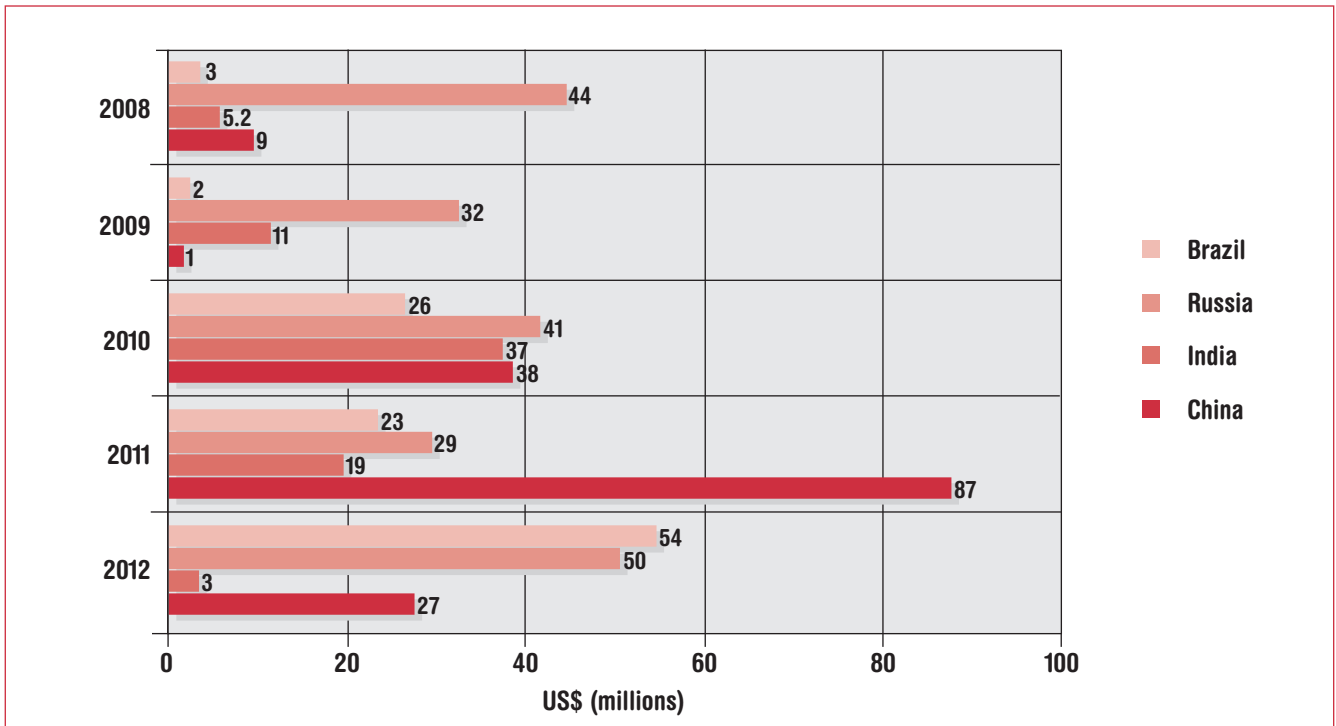
Nevertheless, here too there has been a notable shift towards a more pragmatic approach. For instance, China's relationship with and arms sales to the Sudanese government notwithstanding, the Darfur conflict in 2003 testified to China's willingness to use its leverage over the Sudanese government. Drawing on its economic and diplomatic influence, China secured Sudanese consent to an international intervention, ultimately resulting in the deployment of a hybrid UN–African Union force. China is the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations among the five permanent members of the Security Council, deploying more than 2,000 troops, UN experts and police (as at June 2014). This fact speaks to the country's growing concern for its international reputation and sense of international responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

4 R. Nakano and J. Prantl, 'Global Norm Diffusion in East Asia: How China and Japan Implement the Responsibility to Protect', *NTS Working Paper Series*, no. 5, 2011.

5 M. Hirono and S. Suzuki, 'Why Do We Need "Myth-Busting" in the Study of Sino-African Relations?', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 23, no. 87, 2014.

6 See United Nations, 'Contributors to the UNPO – Monthly Summary of June 2014', <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/contributors.shtml>.

**FIGURE 2: BRICS' COUNTRIES HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE 2008–2012**



Aspiring to project the image of a responsible great power, China has gradually departed from ideology and adapted a more pragmatic, realist stance towards international peace and security.

**Future directions**

Given China’s long, diverse and complex history, conceptual differences with the West concerning the meaning and practice of humanitarianism are inevitable, and will persist. For a number of reasons the country is likely to remain cautious about the use of military force to facilitate international humanitarian assistance. However, China’s endorsement of the basic tenets of R2P – first at the 2005 World Summit, and then in Security Council Resolution 1674 – marks a significant evolution in its normative thinking. Indeed, when it comes to national self-interest China may not be so ‘different’ after all: Western governments too have provided support for regimes with questionable human

rights records, and foreign policy calculations figure in aid calculations in Washington, London and Brussels just as much as they do in Beijing.

In trying to understand Chinese thinking, it is important to appreciate its unique political culture, including the dual concept of responsibility and legitimacy which has for millennia shaped China’s actions, humanitarian and otherwise. As it was in imperial times, so today the Chinese government is dependent on the approval and support of the Chinese public to secure state legitimacy – and the public is becoming more and more vocal about China’s humanitarian role, and increasingly looking at the country’s international reputation as a yardstick for legitimacy. As a result, contributions to international humanitarian action are likely to increase in future, albeit erratically and more visibly motivated by geopolitical deliberations than may be the case with other countries. China will increase its aid-giving – but it will be done the ‘Chinese way’.