

Stories  
of  
China

# Volunteer Campaigns in China

■ Compiled by Zhang Chunxia



新世界出版社  
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## Volunteer Campaigns in China

### 志愿者在行动

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# 1

## 2008, First Year of China's New Volunteer Era

2008, an unforgettable year for the Chinese people, will also go down in history as an important year in the development of China's voluntary services sector. The Beijing Olympic Games and the Wenchuan earthquake unleashed dynamic campaigns of voluntary services by the Chinese people, and accelerated the promotion of a volunteer ethos and the popularization of a volunteer culture.

From the disaster-relief areas of the Sichuan Wenchuan earthquake to the service sites of the Beijing Olympic Games, the number of



Chinese volunteers grew exponentially at an unprecedented rate. According to estimates, about five million volunteers played an active role in the Wenchuan quake-hit areas as well as in disaster-relief work in other areas of China. Their inspired feats demonstrated the vibrant development of civic pride. During the Beijing Olympic and Paralympic Games, hundreds of thousands of onsite volunteers, 400,000 engaged in the City Volunteer Project and a million social volunteers, all provided a complete range of services to people. During the Beijing Olympic Games especially, the smiles of Chinese volunteers touched the whole world, and won the hearts of people internationally.

For several years and for various reasons, many voluntary services had failed to reach their expected goals, with many nongovernmental volunteer organizations (NGOs) finding themselves on the margins of mainstream culture. However, after the Wenchuan earthquake and during the Beijing Olympic Games, massive armies of Chinese volunteers came together in an unprecedented manner, bringing a steady flow of newcomers in their wake. The status

of voluntarism has also changed from playing a minor role in contemporary life into becoming an important part of the society. What is more important, the whole society has begun to express its understanding, respect and esteem for volunteers, with more and more ordinary people actively enlisting as volunteers, and the volunteer spirit returning to its original meaning of spontaneity, autonomy, and voluntary participation. Consequently, 2008 has become the first year in this new era of voluntarism in China. This is the first collective appearance of volunteers in an important demonstration of China's current efforts to build its civil society.

## **1. Wenchuan, We Are with You**

At 14:28 on May 12, 2008, a massive earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale hit Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province. Subsequently, all other parts of China except Jilin, Heilongjiang and Xinjiang felt, to different extents, the quake, with tremors even reaching as far away as Vietnam and Thailand.

Looking back on the rescue experiences



of the Wenchuan earthquake, people were surprised to find out that, one of the words most frequently seen and heard was, “volunteers”. Typing in the keywords “Wenchuan earthquake volunteer” in Baidu.com, gives you more than 4,320,000 relevant web pages.

After the quake, the national rescue forces — with the Army, the Armed Police, professional fire brigades, and medical teams as the main strength — rushed to the quake-hit areas. At the same time, students, businesspeople, workers, peasants, laid-off workers and thousands of ordinary people and numerous non-government organizations voluntarily surged forward to the frontlines of the rescue work. In Wenchuan, Yingxiu, Beichuan, Mianzhu and other places, in every quake-affected locale, they transported goods and materials, took care of the injured, carried out sanitization and epidemic prevention measures, and provided counseling to victims. Among these volunteers, there were many children of the “post-80s” and “post-90s” (those born in the 1980s and after), generations often criticized as extremely individualistic and lacking in any sense of

social responsibility. However, this time, they did not flinch in face of disaster, but many rushed bravely to the front. In a situation where aftershocks, mountain landslides and mud-rock flows were frequent occurrences, volunteers, ready to devote themselves when needed, went straight to the most-devastated areas and remote mountains — often even leaving last wills or writing down their own name and contact information on the backs of their clothing — in order to save lives buried under the debris, with their bare hands and simple tools. They brought tents and food to the victims, as they themselves bivouacked besides the ruins, and ate only instant noodles and biscuits, or sometimes even suffered hunger for a whole day.

Late in the night after the earthquake, it rained heavily, with numerous injured people in Dujiangyan unable to be transported out due to a shortage of vehicles, so Radio Chengdu broadcasted an appeal to taxi drivers. Many taxi drivers, who on ordinary days could quarrel with passengers over one or two yuan in fares or over whether they made an extra “detour”, did not hesitate for a moment; and hundreds of

taxis sped to Dujiangyan with their emergency lights on, emanating splendid rays of life on that inky night. On this fateful night, on the wet and slippery highway between Chengdu and Dujiangyan, many Chengdu taxi drivers drove back and forth many times, enduring hunger and exhaustion, as well as defying the risks of aftershocks and landslides. At the same time, numerous owners of private cars, usually used for leisure, work or business, put up banners such as “Volunteers” or “Voluntary Relief”, and used their own cars to transport rescuers, victims and contingency materials one round after another, all free of charge!

In those areas cut off from vehicles, groups of volunteers trudged arduous mountain roads and even down blind alleys for more than ten hours, and some for several days and nights, carrying heavy knapsacks, facing the risk of aftershocks, falling rocks and landslides, in order to deliver lifesaving food and medicine to victims deep in the mountains. On the way, when it became really impossible for them to carry on, they would unload some materials on the roadside, and persevere with what they

could still manage — so that other volunteers who came after them would pick up the materials on a tacit understanding, in order to accomplish the transport in relays.

For several days after the earthquake, crowds of people swarmed the gates of the Chengdu Red Cross and the Chengdu municipal committee of the Communist Youth League, with several lines of volunteers, meandering several hundred meters, coming forward to fill out their applications. In the Jiuzhou Gymnasium of Mianyang where a large number of victims were temporarily resettled, the first teams of volunteers were identified by their white hats, the issue of which ran out in half a day. Yellow ribbons urgently made for the same purpose were also exhausted in a short time. The volunteers then had to acquire red cloth from the community, and yet the supply still fell short of the demand, such that volunteers were forced to tear five-cm-wide ribbons into halves so as to “economize”. However, many other volunteers did not even use identifiers such as red, yellow or green ribbons, but instead simply engraving the ideal of “volunteer” deep into their own hearts.



In the meantime, numerous NGO and temporary non-government organizations, formed through the internet or scattered through different areas, went into action one after another. In Beijing, eight well-known NGOs held an urgent joint meeting to launch their volunteer projects. In Guangdong, an internet QQ (communication tool) group of quake-relief volunteers, which grew rapidly into 11 QQ groups throughout various areas of the province, unified the coordination of the more than 1,000 volunteers who joined in this temporary nongovernmental effort via the web, to rush to the quake-hit area in teams.

On May 13, NGOs and volunteers in such cities as Chengdu, Beijing, Guizhou, Shanghai and Yunnan established "5.12 Nongovernmental Relief Services Centers" to provide information services for various volunteer actions. That fateful night of the earthquake, at the initiative of a few NGOs, several dozen other NGOs, scattered across the country, formed a loose coalition via the internet, through which the NGOs established a complete cooperation chain with effective division of labor, from the

gathering of disaster information and collection of materials, to onsite rescue and distribution of the relief materials, according to their respective locations and needs.

On May 13 in Chengdu, an “NGO Sichuan Quake-Relief Joint Office” emerged, which became the headquarters for NGOs with different resources. In but a few days after the quake, there were already 13 NGOs that dispatched volunteers to the Office, and more than 100 other NGOs that continuously transported all types of relief materials to the quake-hit areas from the peripheries.

According to an on-the-spot estimation by the experts dispatched by the Working Committee of Volunteers of the China Association of Social Workers, the volunteers from various provinces and municipalities who entered the Sichuan quake-hit zone to provide services exceeded 100,000. The number of volunteers from different areas of Sichuan (including disaster areas and non-disaster areas) who participated in disaster-relief services was more than 1 million. The number of volunteers from all over the country who participated in relief publicity,



donation solicitation and movement of relief materials was more than 10 million. According to the data of the China Youth Volunteers Association, the number of volunteers all over the country who participated in earthquake-relief services reached as high as 4.91 million.

Nobody can determine the exact number of volunteers who gathered in the Sichuan disaster area, yet it is obvious that this marks an unprecedented spontaneous civil action in the history of China, as a volunteer response of the largest scale in China, and the world!

## **Some Volunteers in Quake-Relief Operations**

### **Song Zhiyong Share-the-Love Relief Contingent**

In the Sichuan quake-hit areas, there was the active presence of a special volunteer team — the “Song Zhiyong Share-the-Love Relief Contingent”. This contingent was initially formed by 13 villagers from Dongbalipu Village in Tangshan, Hebei Province, who earlier in February had voluntarily rushed to Chen-

zhou, Hunan Province, to assist local efforts against the ice-and-snow disaster, becoming affectionately known as “The 13 Virtuous Men of Tangshan”. On the afternoon of May 12, upon hearing news of the Wenchuan earthquake, Song Zhiyong immediately departed all by himself. To get to the disaster-hit area as soon as possible, he rented taxis the whole way, via Beijing, Zhenzhou, Xian and Chengdu, and then rented a motorcycle to enter the mountainous areas despite the great danger, finally arriving in Beichuan on the morning of the 14th, to join in the search and rescue work. The next day, the other 12 members also rushed from Tangshan to meet him. To save time, they came by air, and some of the less affluent members had to even borrow money to make this trip. This contingent worked alongside the army, without a break, in such major disaster areas as Mianyang, Beichuan and Anxian, searching for and rescuing victims. In Beichuan alone, they rescued 23 injured persons, and helped to rescue 20 injured, led out more than 300 affected people after going deep into the mountains in search of



▲ May 18, 2008, a Share-the-Love relief team of farmers from Tangshan, unloading relief goods in Anxian County, Sichuan Province.