



At the Frontline of the Rescue

An Interview with Peng Shujie,
Earthquake Frontline News Commander-in-Chief, Xinhua News Agency

EDITORS' NOTE Peng Shujie was born in 1963 in Bengbu, Anhui province. He graduated from Anhui University in 1983 with a degree in foreign languages, and proceeded to study journalism at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, earning a master's degree in 1989. Peng has worked at Xinhua News Agency since 1989, first in the department of home news for overseas services, then in the Chief Editor's office. He joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1994. Peng now serves as Vice Editor-in-Chief of Xinhua News Agency and was appointed frontline Commander-in-Chief for the agency's Sichuan earthquake reports in May 2008.

INSTITUTION BRIEF Xinhua News Agency (www.xinhuanet.com/english) is the official news agency of the People's Republic of China. It aims to communicate to the world on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people, and serves as China's official international news agency. Its 13,000 journalists and staff members produce news in the form of text, images, audio, and video, working in the agency's China headquarters, five regional editorial offices (Africa, Americas, Asia and Oceania, Europe, and Middle East), and more than 100 bureaus around the world.

As China's most important official media entity, how did Xinhua News Agency react to the Sichuan earthquake? What specific instructions did you receive about reporting this catastrophe?

On May 12th at 2:28 PM, an earthquake struck Sichuan. Only seven minutes later, we transmitted a newflash informing the public that Beijing felt the quake, when we had not heard about the disaster from the National Earthquake Bureau or any other source.

At 3:00 PM, a moment after the epicenter was announced, we dispatched a three-person team: a writer, a photographer, and a correspondent. They conducted interviews, took pictures, and sent back the first batch of reports from the disaster area. Shortly afterward, we learned that all roads leading to Wenchuan, the epicenter, were cut off. We sent another five reporter teams, equipped with maritime satellite phones. They tried to get to Wenchuan by helicopter, amphibious landing craft, and on foot with the troops. On May 14th at 11:35 AM, we arrived at the epicenter, becoming the very first media team on the scene.

We were instructed to produce timely, accurate, open, and transparent reports, with a full commitment to earthquake disaster relief. Xinhua is China's official press agency, and it is our duty to offer full media support to the rescue mission during such an immense national disaster.

How were you appointed to be the frontline news Commander-in-Chief?

Within an hour of the earthquake, we established the Xinhua earthquake special reporting group. In the evening, the roads to the earthquake region and other communications were wholly suspended. We completely lost contact with all the reporters covering the Premier and those covering the National Rescue Team. When confronted with this chaotic situation, everyone had one goal: to get to the epicenter as quickly as possible. In the early hours of May 13th, we founded our frontline headquarters unit, and I was appointed the frontline Commander-in-Chief.

After you reached the frontline, what was your most important command responsibility? What was the most difficult part of heading a media agency in the midst of such a crisis?

I've been with Xinhua for more than 20 years and have engaged in reporting significant political and diplomatic events without having any disaster-reporting experience. I set out to take a two-hour plane ride from Beijing to Chengdu and ended up waiting 11 hours at the plane. Finally, at 6:00 AM, I arrived in Chengdu. On the same day, 80 reporters also arrived from all over the country.

My command work had five elements: to communicate intentions and act as a liaison between the reporting and editorial departments; to manage the reporters; to gather source material from the scene to give to the editorial department; to deal with the blind spots – to ensure all of the heavily impacted areas had Xinhua reporters present; and to select a daily theme, and adjust our emphasis based on the changing situation in the disaster zone, since the higher levels of government needed to understand the situation.

The situation was more difficult than I had ever imagined: There were over 7,000 aftershocks in the first 10 days after the quake – 175 over 4.0, 27 over 5.0, and 4 over 6.0 on the Richter scale. We felt violent aftershocks 20 times per day on average, which was quite scary. Communication was much worse than we had predicted. All the dispatched reporters lost communication with headquarters. Although they had 35 maritime satellites and five satellite phones, to save electricity, they kept the machines turned off, except when contacting headquarters. Therefore, headquarters basically became blind and mute. Later, we used solar power and a diesel generator, assigned reporters into different groups, and required them to report to headquarters at fixed times, in order to track them. The way we dispatched reporters was identical to how the troops were organized, which was to deploy the People's



Liberation Army [PLA] and medical treatment teams to enter all the disaster areas simultaneously. By 11:30 AM on May 15th, Xinhua was in all the heavily hit areas. Our first batch of reporters covered rescue work for 10 days, and then switched to treatment and resettlement.

As the Commander-in-Chief, what was the most difficult decision you had to make? Can you describe the state of mind among the reporters at the frontline? Was anybody injured?

The hardest decision was that we knew some reporters were badly affected and the environment was dangerous, but we still needed to send them to the scene. Some reporters were exhausted, while others had psychological trauma, but they still had to go. We have two female reporters who slept by the side of the road for seven days and nights, with no way to brush their teeth or wash their faces, and lacking food and water. One group had to drive more than 650 kilometers to reach a site. Just when they entered the area, a muddy flood blocked their path and they couldn't get out. Finally, they were lifted out by an army helicopter. I also had to decide between ensuring the reporters' safety or keeping them at their posts to accomplish their job. In the face of danger, my ultimate decision was to withdraw them. Protecting lives is more important.

The Xinhua correspondents exceeded my expectations by throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the effort. We rapidly increased to 151 people within two to three days. Among those were people on leave and on their honeymoon. One-third of the first batch of reporters was female. Everyone requested to go, even now people are unceasingly signing up. From the first shake and the first newflash to having our reporters fill each of those "blind spots" was less than four days. We were the first of any media to get there. In some cases, we even arrived before rescue troops.

We take reporters' safety very seriously. Up to now, we haven't had one case of serious injury or death. We did have car-accident-related injuries and close calls with death. Some were almost buried alive by a landslide. We had four reporters in Li county discover that they had left their maritime satellite phone in a building after an interview. When they went back to retrieve it and were inside the building, a violent 5.9 aftershock suddenly hit. They had to push over a wall in order to escape.

As a frontline leader, what instantly comes to mind when referring to "speed of response"? What were the most moving and most inspiring moments that touched you?

On response speed, I feel Xinhua comes

Rescue workers pry loose a trapped victim.

first on several fronts. Out of all participating Chinese media, we were the first to submit a written report and photograph, and were the first group to follow our nation's leaders to enter the earthquake scene and all the heavily hit areas.

The hardest part – the part that distressed me the most – was to see a lot of students lose their lives. What moved me the most was the teachers who sacrificed their lives to save students. We all criticized corruption in education. However, the Minister of Education once said, “You may curse me, but you may not curse my teachers.” The most inspiring thing I saw was our people. In the face of disaster, the people show co-

hesive power and the unifying force of a nation – this is a true source of the power of China.

You were in the critical disaster area, watching history unfold before your eyes. Please share with us the stories of the leaders, military personnel, civilians, rescue workers, and volunteers that made the deepest impression upon you.

Our leaders made the deepest impression on me, with their timely reaction. From the Party Chief to the Premier, to the various leaders in charge, the fastest ones left for the disaster areas within two hours of the earthquake. The people leading the rescue mission at the frontline were all the top-ranking officials. All the efforts centered on “people” in rescue missions, resettlement, and reconstruction, which is very different from the past.

The People's Army and the Armed Police and public-security police were the principal force behind the rescue and relief efforts, and performed many miracles. Fifteen soldiers blindly parachuted from 5,000 meters up without oxygen. They couldn't see their landing area through the thick layer of cloud. In order to get critical information on the damaged, they risked their lives to jump into the unknown. Their heroism is very moving. Medical aid workers were also key. News workers showed their professional spirit and ethics. The help that poured in from all walks of life and the international community reaching out to offer aid – were all very moving too.

You've spoken about so many moving moments. Can you please tell us some concrete numbers that can help us comprehend the magnitude of this disaster?

First comes 8.0 – the most destructive and widest-ranging earthquake in 60 years. By June 4th, the Sichuan earthquake had killed 69,122 and wounded 373,606. The number of people still missing is 17,991, and 46 million people are affected by the calamity. The PLA and the People's Armed Police combined sent 113,080 soldiers from 20 divisions of service. In addition, 115 medical teams were dispatched, as well as 90,000 doctors and nurses from disease control and psychological trauma intervention teams. Tens of thousands of volunteers spanning the country left for the disaster area. Rescuers saved and transferred over a million



Victims too injured or too inaccessible to move were given emergency medicine and supplies where they lay

people, and provided medical treatment to 675,064 patients. Donations total more than CNY 4 trillion.

From May 12th to June 4th at 7:00 PM, Xinhua's earthquake coverage totals 29,642 reports, a record-breaking figure in Xinhua's history. Nearly 500 reporters were dispatched to the disaster area. Also, 66-year-old Premier Wen Jiabao inspected the frontline disaster area three times and convened seven meetings. Those are all the numbers that leave a deep impression on us.

For many years, the West has thought of Chinese media as a “government mouthpiece”

and a “tool for propaganda.” Have you seen any changes with regard to government's involvement in the media in the last 30 years of reform? How did these changes manifest themselves in the reporting of the earthquake?

China is a socialist country. It is a fact that the media is government-owned and plays the role of voicing government policy to the public. Domestically, we deliver information, propagate policy, and motivate the public to do good things for the country. Internationally, we handle our work according to international media standards, and make sure the message that gets delivered abroad reflects the reality of China's development, meets foreign audience's demands, and can be easily understood by the world. In this respect, foreign news agencies and Xinhua function identically.

For a certain period of time, government involvement in Chinese media will be inevitable. However, this does not affect the truthfulness of the news. We now pay more attention to reporting the “grassroots” truth. The Chinese media is gradually adapting to international standards and the essence of the so-called government involvement has also changed, which is inseparable from China's 30 years of reform. For example, 30 years ago, after the Tangshan earthquake, the government put forth the slogan, “Get one furnace of steel, one cart of coal out earlier,” which positioned its rescue priority as expediting production recovery. This time, the government emphasizes that “people come first” in the rescue missions. All the actions are prioritized according to how to better settle the victims and how to help childless senior citizens, orphans, and disabled people at all costs. Consequently, the government started with a mass search effort over mountainous terrain. Officials are trying to give everyone who has a chance to live, the hope of rescue and treatment. For the Chinese media, the real test is whether we can convey this changed focus on people to the whole world.

Therefore, in the aftermath of this earthquake, government involvement in Chinese media means utilizing its resources to more accurately, truthfully, quickly, and transparently report facts to stabilize society and eliminate

panic, through our credible and authoritative source of information.

In the past, the West thought that Chinese media would often downplay disasters in order to maintain the country's image. This time, the Chinese government's lenient attitude toward the scope and volume of news coverage, as well as the level of transparency, astonished the West. What prompted this profound change?

Nowadays, there are multiple channels through which to get information and the Chinese people can choose their news source. This has presented a huge challenge to the government-run media. China has experienced a phenomenon over the last 10 years: The government-run media, as well as the mainstream media, have not grasped the power of speech. For its own survival and development, the government-run media must show up and speak out on the key issues, hot spots, and focal points to which the Chinese people and the whole world will pay attention. During the first week of earthquake reporting, the world's reports were nearly all from Xinhua, which is very different from in the past.

In addition, the change in media reporting is in step with world change. We are in the Internet age, and the mass media cannot monopolize the dissemination of news and information. What isn't written in the newspaper appears online. The government and media all realize whatever is left unsaid will be said, so saying it sooner is much better than later, and letting others speak about you is not as advantageous as saying it oneself. China as a huge nation, accepts globalization for its economic interests and it must undertake some global responsibility. China's masses and international society have the right to understand China. This process started with our open-door reform, as well as with worldwide change. China is becoming an equal member of international society. This great change was sealed on January 1, 2007, with the implementation of the regulations for foreign correspondents covering the Beijing Olympics. As a media professional, I feel the government's current attitude toward media is to make us faster, more accurate, and to have more detail in our reporting.

Therefore, the national image we communicate to the world is: open to the world, sincere, honest, and responsible. After standing the test of a national emergency, China's media has shown a great deal of maturity, courage, and decisiveness. It has become a powerful force to unite society.

Soon after you returned from the disaster frontline, you hurried to be an Olympic torch bearer. As you pass the torch to the world, what message do you want to send?

China's media and media professionals are growing with China's development and forward progress. This earthquake has shown us the strength of our nation and the sincere affection and support of our people, which confirms that we have emerged victorious from this calamity and overcome the obstacles caused by the earthquake. Our country and people have become more united and cohesive. Therefore, we can host a more distinguished and brilliant Olympic Games this summer. 🇨🇳