

# Spirituality and Community in Times of Crisis: Encountering Spirituality in Indigenous Trauma Therapy

Zhengjia Ren

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**Abstract** On May 12, 2008, at 2:28 pm, an earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale struck Southwest China, with its epicenter in Wenchuan. The earthquake destroyed about 6.5 million homes, leaving 4.8 million people homeless. According to official figures, 69,197 people were confirmed dead, including some 5,335 school children, while an additional 18,222 were listed as missing (Sina.com 2009). As clinical or therapeutic workers, we are used to viewing an individual who has experienced tremendous trauma as simply suffering from PTSD, depression, or grief. We must come to appreciate the deeply personal and cultural spiritual resonances that our patients bring to us. This helps us to understand the meaning of spirituality in the context of Chinese culture when we face people suffering from trauma. In China, spirituality in community serves as a deep bond between the family system and the culture and faith system, penetrating into behavioral habits and individual experiences in everyday life, including responding to traumatic events and experiences. This case report focuses on survivors of the 2008 earthquake in order to understand how Chinese spirituality may be involved in the process of psychological rehabilitation. Clarifying this process will further the development of spirituality research and education in China, ultimately benefiting clinical psychological practice in China.

**Keywords** Spirituality · Trauma · Trauma therapy · Case report

## Background

Standing in a church in Pasadena, California, watching lines of devotees offering incense in California's Hsi Lai Temple, listening to hymns during Catholic and Jewish worship services, observing believers prostrate at a mosque—in these moments I have felt a deep sense of transcendent connection. At such times, I glimpse a form of devotion that bridges the divide between what we ordinarily perceive as boundaries between cultures and religions. The music and images echo in my memory.

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Z. Ren (✉)  
Mental Health Center, West China Hospital,  
Sichuan University,  
28# Dian Xin Nan Jie, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610041 People's Republic of China  
e-mail: renzhengjia@hotmail.com

While listening to Chinese and American scholars debate the question of spirituality in the United States, I have often asked myself these questions: What does it mean to live a life of spirituality? What is the meaning of spirituality in the context of Chinese culture? The word ‘spirituality’ does not exist in the Chinese language, nor is there any equivalent concept. This does not mean, however, that Chinese people do not have a spirituality. Eastern and other non-European cultures have their own unique understandings of spirituality. Philip Sheldrake (2007) has said that spiritual practices aid in the development of an individual’s inner life. Spirituality is the manifestation of an individual’s subjective feeling of subjectivity. According to Douglas McDonald (2000), spirituality can be defined as religious attitudes, experiences, existential well-being, paranormal beliefs, and religious practices. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* does have a modest entry under ‘spirituality.’ The term spirituality, according to the dictionary, is “used to refer to people’s subjective practice and experience of their religion, or the spiritual exercises and beliefs which individuals and groups have with regard to their personal relationship with God” (Cross & Livingstone, 1997, p. 1532). But we should not think of spirituality in this utterly abstract and esoteric way. Spirituality pervades every aspect of our lives. Some might even assert that it is the foundation of being human. We must be careful not to think of spirituality as some vague universal notion, even though various religious traditions assert that spirituality transcends all conceptual categories.

When we discuss the question of spirituality, we have no choice but to rely on the Western definition of this word in our search for corresponding concepts in Chinese culture. But Chinese culture itself is incredibly complex and diverse. How can we approach a coherent understanding of spirituality in this context? Taking up this question requires us to encounter the culture itself. The relationship between a culture and those that live within it is like the relationship between water and fish or between sky and birds; without water and sky, fish and birds have no way to survive. Similarly, if we want to discuss spirituality in the lives of Chinese people, we must enter into their cultural world; we must swim in those waters, soar in that sky. If we want to understand the role of spirituality in our lives and the lives of others, we must first understand how history and culture have constructed our understanding of the concept of spirituality.

Chinese people live in the daily presence of the spiritual. This is particularly true of those who survive in the remote rural and mountainous regions of China’s interior provinces. In my 3 years of experience with these people, they shared many of their stories with me, stories which revealed much about their spiritual lives. My motivation for writing this essay is both to share their stories and to share the story of my own spiritual journey of the past 3 years.

On May 12, 2008, the deadly Sichuan earthquake, also known as the Great Sichuan Earthquake, which measured 8.0 on the Richter scale, occurred at 2:28 p.m. local time. The earthquake killed at least 68,000 people in the Sichuan province of China, leaving more than 18,000 missing and close to 400,000 injured (Sina.com 2009). When I first arrived in the disaster zone to begin my work with the survivors of the Sichuan earthquake, I encountered spirituality in many situations. I was unsure about how to use the Western notion of spirituality in a Chinese context. As I gained clinical experience in the province of Sichuan, I found that the spiritual lives of Chinese people are incredibly varied and diverse. In facing traumatic events and experiences, the spirit or spirituality gives both individuals and communities a great sense of strength and cohesion.

I often asked myself why I got on the train to go to Sichuan in the first place. In the days immediately following the earthquake, watching the sounds and images of the disaster zone dance across my television screen in Guangzhou, I felt the cries of the victims and survivors

pressing deeply within my heart. Following their gazes and the images of destruction in the media, I began to ask myself: What kind of life do I truly desire? If today I were in the disaster zone, if my body were buried, barely alive, deep beneath the ruins, then what would my life be? What is the most important thing in life? Is it living in a big house? Driving a sports car? Or status and reputation? These questions pursued me every day before I boarded the train for Sichuan and traveled into the disaster zone. I constantly asked myself, why did I choose to study medicine and psychology? I couldn't sleep or eat, and I felt ill at ease. These reflections were a turmoil within me. What gives me meaning? What do I value? So great, so urgent and strong was the sound of this lament in my ears that I bought a one-way ticket to Sichuan and set out in search of the answers to my questions.

### Spirituality East and West

Western scholars think 'spirituality' refers to an ultimate reality or transcendent dimension of the world: 1) Spirituality is an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his or her being, or the "deepest values and meanings by which people live"; 2) Spiritual practices, including meditation, prayer, and contemplation, are intended to develop an individual's inner life, and such practices often lead to an experience of connectedness with a larger reality—a more comprehensive self, other individuals or the human community, nature or the cosmos, or the divine realm; 3) Spirituality is often experienced as a source of inspiration or orientation in life; 4) Spirituality can encompass a belief in immaterial realities or experiences that may be both the immanent or transcendent nature of the world. In order to share something about Chinese spirituality from a psychological perspective, I will provide an overview of some of the spiritual resources upon which Chinese culture is based.

*Confucianism* Confucianism is a foundational social and moral principle. Confucianism in China is respected as the most powerful spiritual base, for it meets and realizes the spiritual and social needs of the majority of society. Confucius identified the five virtues of truthfulness, reverence, generosity, diligence, and kindness and the eight sub-virtues of mildness, uprightness, goodness, frugality, tolerance, directness, respectfulness, and sincerity, the practices which make people benevolent. The core of Confucianism is benevolence, and the core of benevolence is "loving people," which not only expresses ethical and moral values but is also a succinct summary of many other virtues.

Confucians think that people who have these basic virtues and values are wise people and should be respected. This basic idea leads to Administration of Ceremony (礼治), which supports the Administration of Morality (德治) and Administration of Humanity (人治). The doctrine of the Administration of Ceremony is embodied by "propriety." In order to maintain order in society, different classes have different standards and requirements for the Administration of Ceremony. For example, the so-called "Norm" is Jun Jun-chen-chen, or father and son father son moral order; this is also known as "Junchen father and son, Norm of the present" (Yuan 2009). Confucius used this "Norm" to examine the essence of propriety and to attach a moral implication to it. In his view, rites are a means to standardize people's behavior and to regulate inter-personal relationships, making them harmonious and orderly.

From the level of the entire country down to the single family, each individual, including the emperor, needs to follow the regulations of Administration of the "Norm." The country's stability is built upon the stability of these relationships. The Confucian Administration of Ceremony, in other words, is a type of invisible law.

Benevolence is the core of Confucianism and directly plays a large role in modeling the character and shape of Chinese culture. Mencius and his followers developed and improved Confucius's theories of ruling through propriety and benevolence, introducing the concept of benevolent government, which is regarded as the center of Confucian political thought. The concept of benevolent government requires people to "cultivate individual moral character, run the family in unison, [and] manage the nation in order, and peace will prevail throughout the universe." This is the core of the meaning system of the Chinese people, and the Chinese pursue their lives following these ideas. This is also the origin of their anxiety, as Confucianism has constructed their ego system and superego system. Confucianism requires a number of behaviors of people; from morality to filial piety, from social relationships to family relationships, almost every aspect of behavior and cognition is regulated. Confucianism becomes the foundation of a person's belief system; it also helps people to deal on a realistic and practical level with their relationships with others.

*Taoism* Taoism is thought to foster inner peace and harmony among individuals. The core of Taoism is Dao (道), which is considered as the source of the universe and the fundamental principle of all motions in the universe. In the classic *Dao De Jing* (道德经), Taoism pays attention to heaven's nature and to human nature. On the other hand, it is also strongly influenced by Chinese people's lifestyle. For some people in China, Taoism is more useful than Confucianism in relation to the whole world's virtuous development, it is more respectful of human nature than Confucianism, and thus it is a very important resource that complements Confucianism's requirements and rules because it truly satisfies the inner needs and desires of individuals. Besides, Taoism is also a perfect advocate of the harmonious co-existence of humans, nature, and spirituality.

The way that Chinese people seek spiritual experiences is very much similar to the pursuit of Dao (道), because the Dao is related to harmonious life. Peter Merel (1995) provides the following translation of the twenty-first chapter of the *Dao De Jing*:

Harmony is only in following the Way.  
 The Way is without form or quality,  
 But expresses all forms and qualities;  
 The Way is hidden and implicate,  
 But expresses all of nature;  
 The Way is unchanging,  
 But expresses all motion.  
 Beneath sensation and memory  
 The Way is the source of all the world.  
 How can I understand the source of the world?  
 By accepting.

*Buddhism* The three fundamental beliefs of Buddhism are impermanence, suffering, and not-self. Impermanence expresses the Buddhist notion that all things and experiences are fleeting. Buddhism does not have metaphysical assertions such as "I have a Self" and "I have no Self." Everything is in constant flux, and so conditions and the thing itself are constantly changing. Things are constantly coming into being and ceasing to be. Since nothing lasts, there is no inherent or fixed nature associated with any object or experience. Suffering is also a central concept in Buddhism. The word 'suffering' roughly corresponds to a number of

terms, including suffering, pain, sorrow, affliction, anxiety, dissatisfaction, discomfort, anguish, stress, misery, and frustration.

Not-self is the third mark of existence. Upon careful examination, one finds that no phenomenon is really “I” or “mine”; these concepts are in fact constructed by the mind. The *anatta* is not meant as a metaphysical assertion. In Buddhism, the Pāli term *anattā* or *anātman* refers to the notion of “not-self.” In early texts, the Buddha commonly uses the word in the context of teaching that all things perceived by the senses (including the mental sense) are not really “I” or “mine,” and for this reason one should not cling to them. This is an approach for gaining release from suffering. Life is an endless suffering, and everyone will pass through birth, death, illness, and getting older through time; life is impermanent. By analyzing the constantly changing physical and mental constituents of a person or object, the practitioner comes to the conclusion that neither the respective parts nor the person as a whole comprise a self.

*Folk religion* Chinese folk religion is deeply embedded in Chinese customs and Chinese history. Feng Shui, Yin-Yang Theory, and Five Elements Theory play a pervasive role in shaping ecology, numerology, and environmental science. Chinese people’s superstitious belief in accordance with personal experiences is constituted of fortune-telling, necromancy, shamans’ methods to get rid of disease and calamity, religious taboos, festive taboos, wedding taboos, funeral taboos, evocation rites (the act of calling or summoning a spirit, ghosts, god, or other supernatural agent), sophisticated sacrifices to ghosts and gods, and so on. Among these practices, fortune-telling, witch’s necromancy, and witch doctors’ magic rituals still have a strong influence among many Chinese people.

In Chinese culture, everyone is expected to follow or obey what Confucianism requires of them, but when people cannot achieve this ideal, they experience inner conflict and anxiety. Because not everyone can become the person that Confucianism requires, Buddhism and Taoism can become a very important compensation and can help them find another way in their search for a meaningful life. And folk religion, or superstition, can help people handle their conflicts through ceremonies and other practical aspects of life and to resolve guilt and give comfort when a person feels utterly helpless. Chinese people seek to follow the Confucian perspective and to live an orderly life. They also know, however, that their existence is impermanent, filled with suffering, and that there is no self. Most people simply try to live their lives as best they can. They also use traditional ceremonies to show their respect for nature and to acknowledge the unknowable and to express their awe. So, it is not possible to say that people ‘belong’ to Confucianism or Buddhism or Taoism or folk religion. They live in a culture that shapes their spiritual lives, finding ways to deal with their inner conflicts and learning how to compensate for their errors, failures, and the vicissitudes of life.

Now I would like to share stories of real people as they confronted the aftermath of the devastating Sichuan earthquake of May 12, 2008.

## Case One

Go back in time with me. It is 10 days after the earthquake, and I have begun making house calls in the temporary survivors’ settlement. Every day I interview the same old woman. She is over 70 years old, and a life of manual labor in the mountains has gifted her with a strong body and little regard for the ornamentation of words. She does not speak much. The most

she ever says is, “Thank you, all of you. Thank you, Communist Party.” Every day, we make a routine evaluation of her psycho-emotional status and an assessment of how we might best tailor our assistance to meet her needs. Each day I visit her in her temporary shelter to determine her current situation and needs. Our first evaluation listed her as a clear case of acute stress disorder but, from her perspective, this was not her primary problem. In the course of our working together, I was rarely able to progress beyond offering her my daily sympathy and greetings. Then one day, piecing together her words, she asked me, “Are you a Buddhist?” Continuing to talk, she explained that she had an unfulfilled wish weighing on her heart. “In the quake, my husband was buried in a landslide and his body was never recovered. It has already been many days since then and he cannot have survived. I know that this is a great disaster visited upon us by the heavens, and not a situation unique to me and my family. According to our custom, we must arrange for the traditional funeral rites to be performed for the dead. This is the only way that we can be certain that our relatives won’t become wandering spirits or wild ghosts. Now I cannot go back to our village to arrange the rites, as it is buried under the mountain, and I worry about this every day.” After hearing this, I called on a friend familiar with the local religious culture to arrange a funeral ceremony on behalf of those who had perished in the earthquake. After participating in this ritual, the elderly survivors of the quake seemed to have had a large burden lifted from their shoulders overnight.

A few days later, I heard that a group of women and elderly survivors wanted to visit the temple to recite a liturgy for the dead; apparently, this had been on their minds for quite some time but it had not come up in the course of our daily interviews and evaluations. These people had never before encountered psychotherapy in their lives and, for the most part, it seemed that they neither understood nor had any interest in it. Luckily, there was a temple near the refugee settlement. In organized groups, nearly all of the survivors from the settlement went to the temple to recite the liturgy and make offerings on behalf of their deceased loved ones. This—and not psychotherapy—was the method by which they chose to process and express their grief. On a personal level, this mode of engagement with their loss was a way of expressing their unresolved feelings towards their loved ones and, at a socio-cultural level, the liturgy and offerings represented a collective fulfillment of their responsibility to aid the deceased in their migration to the afterlife. By following indigenous methods for dealing with grief and loss, they were able to establish a dialogue with their local culture. Their performance of the funeral rites according to folk custom perfectly embodied the Confucian ethos emphasizing the importance of ritual in life and death: “In life, carry out business according to the rites. In death, perform the funeral and offerings according to the rites as well.”

Following the earthquake, national and local memorial services, both organized and spontaneous, were held. While modern in certain ways, they were also distinctly Confucian in provenance. In the Confucian view, the performance of ritual is not simply a superficial drama; it is in fact the true manifestation of compassion and benevolence, the primordial elements of Confucian ideology. When Confucians live in accord with this principle of compassion, they receive in return the gift of community cohesion and an internal sense of connection.

## Case Two

Around the same time, I often ran into men in the refugee settlement who appeared to be bearing the weight of great trauma; they gave me an entirely different set of questions to

consider. On the whole, their most common symptoms were anxiety, depression, and insomnia, all of which suggested the textbook diagnosis of acute stress disorder. Like the elderly woman, however, the treatment of these personal symptoms did not concern them greatly. Their greatest concerns related to their role in the family: How am I going to rebuild my homes and family? How am I going to lead my family into a new feeling of hope for the future? A male villager reflected, “Sometimes I feel totally helpless. Before the earthquake, I labored for more than 10 years; labored to save money, support my family. Now, after the earthquake, I have nothing. I am nearly 50 years old now and can no longer perform manual labor to make money; I am useless. I can’t sleep at night, but who can I look to for help? A man cannot turn to anyone to share these feelings; at times like these, he must simply drown his sorrows in a glass of liquor.”

In the course of working together, I found this man to be reluctant to accept help from others; he was, at times, even annoyed with the constant concern and attention offered by me and my colleagues. In the temporary settlement, shelter and daily meals were provided by the community. Every day, we would come by to check on him, his situation, and his needs. In this environment, he lost his previous cultural orientation and sense of self-reliance; he had no way of fulfilling his culturally relevant responsibilities as a husband and father. I worked with him to slowly reconstruct his sense of identity and self-reliance, particularly his responsibilities to his family. One day, I was on my way to visit this man when someone approached me to deliver a message for him. The messenger told me that the man had left for his home village to begin helping with reconstruction; he wanted me to know, the messenger said, that “a man shouldn’t be here; he should return to his village to work.”

During my time at the settlement, I watched the originally mixed-gender and generationally diverse population slowly transform until the only ones left in the camp were the elderly, injured, women, and children. The demands made on men in Chinese culture have a great influence on their spiritual lives. When they embody and identify with their given role, many access an internal well of energy that provides them with the remarkable ability to transcend pain and hardship. The Confucians say, “On earth, the state is the foundation. In the state, the family is the foundation.” Hiking across the mountain passes to get back to their ancestral homes and begin laboring to clear the rubble and rebuild their homes and lives, the men who left our refugee settlement were following the path laid before them by centuries of Confucian rulers, husbands, and fathers. The classic text of Liji, *The Great Learning* (Yuan 2009), says: “Cultivate the body, administer the family, rule the state.” In following these dictates, a man engages in a process of continual self-perfection and pursues an idealized state of human accomplishment. Thus, he finds meaning.

Stroebe and Schut (2001) recognize that the central drive that motivates these grief tasks is the search for meaning, both in the lost relationship and in a newly (re)constructed life. Viktor Frankl (1963), after his holocaust experiences, placed meaning at the very heart of personal growth and reconciliation following trauma. When I first arrived at the temporary camp, I was faced with so many traumatized survivors that I did not know what to do. Everywhere I turned I saw the same silent men, the same women’s faces, exhausted and numb. As I and others felt our way, we came to a deep appreciation of the importance of using the indigenous culture as a medium for effective and meaningful psychotherapy. We asked the locals, “When you feel anxious or under great stress, what do you do to relieve this feeling?” They replied, “Sometimes we gather a group of people to dance a circle dance. Or we drink. Both of these make us feel much better.” After hearing this, we began to advertise a community circle dance every evening around a large tree. As people heard our announcement, they slowly began to leave their shelters and join in, using dance and music to work through their loss and trauma. For the entire evening, we didn’t need to say a thing. This was



their local music, the dance steps familiar to them since childhood. As they fell into sync with the rhythm, they began a natural process of self-therapy at a spiritual level. This was their indigenous form of behavioral psychotherapy, a form that had supported their ancestors through centuries of hardship. Through this collective movement, they expressed a direct connection with their spiritual selves and with the lifeblood of their culture. The spirit, or spirituality, manifest in our daily lives through specific behaviors and rituals, weaves a transcendent thread of connection through our lives. This connection transcends time and place; it sprouts and flourishes in the fertile ground of culture.

One family that I worked with in the settlement had experienced a particularly devastating loss in the earthquake. This family originally had six members: the husband, the wife, the wife's parents, and their two young children, all living together in this region. Two children—their daughter of 12 years and son of 1.5 years—perished in the earthquake. I first met this family 3 months after the earthquake. Although I had been working for many months with numerous traumatized survivors, I still committed myself to viewing of every individual as a unique and personal case. Like all Chinese families in times of crisis, this family held together very closely in the face of their hardships. They were a very cohesive and inter-reliant group, sharing the pain and emotion of all their trauma collectively. In so doing, the four surviving members were as if one individual, indivisible. Paradoxically, this dependence also built tall barriers between the family members such that they could not enter each others' private worlds. As in many Chinese families, the men were non-demonstrative, using silence to speak on behalf of their inner pain. Silence is a language in itself, as it tells the story of an internal trauma for which there are no words. Thus, as I began working with this family I reflected on the best method for engaging them in the process. How, in the rich, dark soil of their indigenous culture was I to plant the seeds of spiritual health and recovery?

One hundred days after the earthquake, large numbers of refugees were still living in the temporary settlement. In accordance with their wishes, we organized a Hundredth Day Memorial on behalf of all of their relatives who had been taken in the disaster. The atmosphere that day was very solemn. Every person held a white chrysanthemum in their hand, a symbol of their longing and grief. This was the first time that all of the refugees and all of the volunteers had gathered together as one to remember the departed. The performance of this ceremony represented not only the realization of unfulfilled desires, as the strictly Western psychotherapist might view it. More importantly, it was the completion of a spiritual path that the deceased and the living had to walk together. In walking this path, the living expressed their care and yearning for the deceased. In their tears and the sincerity of their devotion, they silently said to those who had passed on, "You have departed, but you will never be forgotten." In so doing, the survivors also reminded themselves that when their day to pass on arrived they needn't fear, for they too will be remembered. Though the individual spirituality is but a single drop in the great river of culture, it is forever a part of that river; it never dries up.

At the conclusion of the Hundredth Day Memorial, we invited everyone to write down their wishes and caring words for the deceased on cards. The messages they wrote included:

"I wish my niece and nephew a happy time in heaven."

"Mama, I'll never forget you, I wish you could come back to my side."

"I wish all the mothers in heaven a wonderful time there."

"I hope there will never be another disaster like this again."

From reading the survivors' messages, we could tell that their spiritual views included a conception of and belief in the existence of a heavenly world. In facing the loss of their loved ones, these people did not retreat into hopelessness because they trusted, in their spiritual



selves, that life continues after death, albeit in a different form. In facing this terrible tragedy, they did not appear entirely without strength and hope.

### Case Three

When I first began working with the survivors, I often encountered individuals questioning previously held beliefs. For example, Grandma Long was over 70 years old. Her husband, who had been a village doctor, perished in the earthquake. As a couple, they had both been devout Buddhists. Members of the Qiang minority group, they lived together in a remote mountain village. Ever since the earthquake, Grandma Long couldn't get one question out of her head: "Everyone says that good actions beget good returns," she said. "If this is true, then why didn't I get good returns?" Going on, she would lament, "What did we do wrong to deserve this? When my husband was the village doctor, sometimes people would call him in the middle of the night to deliver a baby. It didn't matter what time it was; he would always go to help. How can something like this have happened to a person like him? Everyone says good people are rewarded for their actions. If this is true, then why wasn't he rewarded?" Thus, she began to continuously question and scrutinize her beliefs. In fact, many of the people in the refugee camps could be heard expressing similar feelings. Among their cries, I heard survivors questioning their most fundamental views on morality and divine justice: "Oh God! How could you be so unjust? What did my child do wrong that you had to take him away?" "What did I do wrong to deserve this punishment?" "What sin did I commit in a past life?" In this manner, a large number of survivors found themselves questioning deeply held systems of meaning and experiences of the spiritual. For many people in China, a simple understanding of the Buddhist conception of karma and rebirth, which states that "good actions beget positive returns and evil actions negative returns," forms the basis of their conception of good and evil and of the relationship of morality and spirituality.

Following such a great disaster, the limitations of this view became the source of much spiritual anguish for the people I worked with. When one's inner spiritual world and beliefs come to contradict lived experience, this contradiction quickly becomes a well of great suffering. Many people continuously explore and question the nature of their spiritual lives, continuously inquiring of themselves or others to find answers to their questions. After experiencing a massive collective trauma on the scale of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, many people no longer believe in any religion at all. Others find in a new religion answers more satisfactory than those provided by their previous faith and thus convert to this religion in pursuit of a new encounter with their spiritual selves. Still others become convinced that the cause of their suffering was their lack of sufficient faith and devotion; for these people, a disaster such as the Sichuan earthquake prompts them to devote themselves with even greater earnestness to their original spiritual path.

As reconstruction efforts developed, many survivors left the temporary settlement to return to their home villages and begin rebuilding their lives. This process of reconstruction encompassed not only the physical and architectural spheres but also the rebuilding of communities, local cultures, and spiritual vitality at the individual and collective levels. The survivors gradually worked to recover the structure of their past lives. What many hoped for was to "return to everyday life as it was before." And so they began to recover the habits of daily life and past modes of social interaction along with the slow strengthening of their daily spirits and desires. For example, on the days of religious festivals, they began again to plan with friends and relatives to attend the relevant activities. Many who had sustained great trauma and loss chose to participate in purification rituals. The purification rituals

included attending big special religious ceremonies, such as going to the temple to pray for the dead. Or, people went to a graveyard to pay their respects to the dead by placing meat, vegetables, and wine in front of the tombs and burning incense, candles, and paper money. Through these actions, those who had suffered the loss of close relatives and other loved ones began the important work of searching within their indigenous culture for means of resolution and transcendence.

In the population that we worked with there was one demographic that stood out as particularly significant: mothers who had lost children in the earthquake. This cohort—and among them, in particular, those mothers who had lost all of their children—experienced a nearly unfathomable spiritual struggle in the aftermath of the disaster. Their struggle included not only dealing with the personal pain and grief of their loss but, perhaps even more importantly, the challenges to their spiritual strength placed on them by their socio-cultural environment. Many such women found in themselves a new-found fear of old age: “With no children, what will I do late in life? Who will take care of me?” they wondered. “And after I die, who will perform the funeral ceremony and burn offerings for my spirit? With nobody to do this, will I not then become a wandering spirit or a wild ghost?”

In this culture, one’s children are an essential component of and support to one’s spiritual life. One’s children are not simply an assurance of care and attention in old age; they are a means of continuing one’s spiritual existence as well. As children grow and mature, their parents instill in them something of their own spiritual selves. Thus, when it comes time for the parents to face death, they can find solace in the knowledge that their offspring will continue to carry their spirits into the future. In rural Chinese villages, children are always the end-of-life caregivers for their parents. In traditional village culture, the attitude towards life after death is one of skeptical half-belief. People believe such a thing is possible and will neither affirm nor deny its existence with certainty; such is the well-worn philosophy of rural life. They believe that after death they may still have an opportunity to establish a spiritual link with their living offspring. However, if their children are no longer on this earth, then they have lost the living node of connection in the human realm.

Following the earthquake, as we began to appreciate the unique needs of this group of mothers, we came to call them “Lost Relatives Mamas.” In the wake of the disaster, they tended to progress from a state of total helplessness and anger into one in which they began to wonder how they could become pregnant again. Despite the fact that many of these women were long past the ideal age for bearing children, they still continued to pursue this path undeterred. This was not simply a question of biology; in Chinese culture, this is a matter of great spiritual significance. Over the last few years, I have interviewed many people in both the disaster zone and in other areas, asking them all the same question: “What is the most meaningful aspect of life?” The majority of their responses are very similar:

“Being together with family.”

“Raising a child.”

“Watching my child mature and start a family and career of his own.”

These responses reflect the common philosophy and spiritual value systems of many Chinese people.

#### Case Four

According to the diagnostic standards of the DSM-IV, people in the Wenchuan earthquake suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Following the earthquake, many people

experienced similar symptoms: nightmares, terrors, insomnia, avoidance, somatization, and flashbacks. In treating these symptoms, we applied the standard of care of Western medicine, prescribing mood adjustment medications as well as symptom-specific medications. During the treatment period, we performed re-evaluations every week. However, as a treatment method these medications were not as effective among the rural refugees as I had experienced them to be in my urban clinical work; additionally, patient compliance with the medications was poor. From their perspective, taking medications to treat psychological problems was a foreign and unfamiliar concept. In the entirety of their personal and cultural memories and awareness, they could not refer back to a single previous example in which medications were used to treat psychological problems. In the event that they had heard of such a thing, it was only in the context of an uncertain guess or a rumored story about the strange customs of a far-away place. Even when our patients experienced some relief from their symptoms after taking medications, the medications were incapable of alleviating the massive trauma and suffering experienced collectively in their families. Our patients' symptoms would always recur. Our weekly individual and family therapy sessions did little more than provide a fleeting moment of support in the vast expanse of suffering experienced by these people every hour of every day. Many of us experienced psychotherapists worked in this manner with the survivors, and none of us made very much progress. We could only encourage ourselves by saying, "These things take time."

One day, in the course of working in the refugee settlement, we heard the news that reconstruction plans necessitated the relocation of the cemetery which had been built for children who had perished in the quake. Our team was very anxious about this. For the desperately bereaved parents of these children, would not this be too much to bear? Would it be only a source of further suffering? Our team, along with the survivors themselves, could not do anything to prepare ourselves for this. As the planned day for the cemetery relocation drew nearer, an undeniable yet unmistakable sense of worry and fear grew larger and larger in our hearts. Young mothers of deceased children told me, for example, "My daughter came to see me in my dream, but whatever I did I could not seem to embrace her, then I woke up and, in the middle of the night, I ran to my daughter's graveside and wept. When I woke up the next morning, I could not move my arms." Bereaved grandmothers also shared similar stories with me.

From the perspective of Western medicine, the cases I present here are not unexpected or difficult to diagnose. We might say they are caused by the resurfacing of an early childhood trauma, the action of unfulfilled desires on the mind, or the non-rational cognition of trauma. Alternatively, we could attribute causation to the loss of meaning in life following a catastrophic tragedy. But if you, kind reader, permit me to speak directly, none of these diagnostic modalities provided us the tools we needed to guide our patients back to their normal life. It is both irresponsible and ultimately futile to attempt to use medical science to rebuild the lives and spiritual strength of our patients, as this is a foreign and unfamiliar epistemological paradigm for them. In working in the community of survivors, I came to understand that this culture has its own "Way," has its own uniquely effective methods of spiritual recovery.

As the day of the cemetery relocation drew nearer, we began to discuss it with our patients. They had prepared for this day for 6 months, yet when we inquired as to their readiness they declined to tell us what was planned. On the day of the event, we found that they had prepared extensively according to the Chinese modes of funerary rites. A Daoist priest was invited to oversee the proceedings, and chickens were to be sacrificed to appease the ghosts and hungry spirits. When the graves were unearthed, the bodies of the deceased were placed into a new casket and re-wrapped in the traditional manner. Then, the priest

performed a spirit ritual before the casket was taken to the new cemetery. At the new cemetery, the priest once again performed a spirit ritual and used his abilities in divination to determine the correct directional orientation and time for the burial. Before the burial could commence, the priest performed further rituals, and hundreds of deafening firecrackers were lit to scare away malevolent spirits from the gravesite. Observing this process, I noticed many changes in the emotional temperament of my patients that I had not previously seen, some of which may seem strange to the reader. Why is it that this relatively short relocation process should have such a great spiritual effect on these people? In Chinese culture, any family who loses a family member will hold certain ceremonies. The traditional ceremony requires that all attendees offer a white (and sometimes red) envelope, usually enclosing a small sum of money (in odd numbers, usually one dollar), a sweet, a red thread, and a handkerchief, each with symbolic meaning. The family invites a priest to hold a funeral ceremony, and the priest performs many ceremonial activities such as reciting or chanting scriptures for the dead. The priest also helps remove sins from the dead so that the deceased can live in the Pure Land. These ceremonies allow the people who have lost their relatives to let them go. The influence of culture on the construction of subjective experience truly cannot be overestimated.

On the day of the relocation, our team of volunteers went to the cemetery to accompany the community. According to traditional custom, community members started digging the graves at the time predetermined by the Daoist priest's divination. As they began this work, I saw an enthusiasm, vitality, and sense of determined purpose in their expressions that I had not previously seen. The intensity of the mood rose to a climax after the graves had been fully excavated and the bodies of the deceased had been lifted from their original caskets. To this day, I can still clearly feel the deep inner sadness and solemnity of those moments. The sadness was so profound that words are inadequate to express the depth of my feelings. Seeing the parents taking care of their precious children's bodies was overwhelming.

As I write this, the images of that day float again in my mind and heart. As the children's bodies were dug from the earth by the hands of friends and relatives, we stood by supporting the family members looking on. Upon seeing the bodies of their deceased sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters rising again before their eyes after nearly 2 years of interment in the earth, the mothers and grandmothers of these children wept and wept to the point of nearly fainting. The tears of the children's fathers and grandfathers welled up at the edges of their eyes. Our team of volunteers were no different. As I write this, my eyes once again fill with tears, tears not only of sadness, but in reverence for the profundity of inner connection that one experiences at a cultural ritual in such a setting.

## Case Five

The women of rural China are the most devout upholders of traditional Chinese cultural values; this characterization was especially accurate for many of the individuals I worked with. One such woman was severely injured in the earthquake and faced a life of disability and physical hardship. In her view, however, this was not the source of her greatest suffering. Over nearly a year of working with her, I came to a deep realization of the profound influence that traditional culture had on her life. Even though she was already over 50 years old, she always made herself up in the manner of a much younger woman. As we gradually established a trusting relationship, she confided in me that she was not so directly troubled by the fact that she had lost a limb in the earthquake as by the fact that, since becoming an amputee, her husband seemed to have lost interest in her, cutting off her financial support

and often heading out at night to be with his new lover. When I invited her to share her thoughts and feeling about this issue, she surprised me by saying that, in fact, her husband had been seeing this woman off and on for 10 years already. Hearing this, I invited her to explore her feelings on this topic a bit further, to which she responded, “Surely, you must be wondering why we are still together? Why I have not divorced him yet?” She explained: “If I wanted a divorce, we would have gotten one long ago. My primary concern has been to keep the family intact for our children. People always say that a good woman doesn’t get married twice. What if I found a new husband and he turned out to be even worse? Then it would really be all over for me. Now, other people all think I have made the right decision. If I got a divorce, then how would they look at me? Every day I clean the house until it’s sparkling; nobody would say I’ve ever completed my household duties half-heartedly. And so why does he treat me like this? How can he be so cruel? What did I ever do wrong?” She persisted in her marriage, all the while fantasizing that 1 day her husband would have a change of heart.

The demands of Chinese culture on women’s behavior had a profound influence on this woman’s spirit. She did everything in her power to fulfill the social requirements placed on her shoulders. The support and validation she received from the community for her righteous stand to keep her family intact, along with the community’s contempt for her husband and his infidelity, gave her the strength to carry on. I could not tell her that she should end her empty marriage; there was far too much of her basis for personal identity and meaning tied up in it. In persevering for the sake of her family, her inner experience of herself was one of an ideal traditional woman who had the misfortune to encounter a cruel man. In the process of withstanding his cruelty, she gained the community’s validation as well as an internal confirmation of her own self-identity and self-worth. In the indigenous cultural milieu, her actions won her both internal strength and external socio-cultural confirmation.

## Conclusion

While I was in the Sichuan earthquake survivors’ settlement, I often invited refugees from the remote mountainous regions to share their views on spirituality or the spirit with me. How did they understand this concept? Nearly every time, I received the same response: “I don’t know. The only thing I know is how to raise my children well, protect them from illness and misfortune. As long as the whole family is safe and harmonious, all is okay.” Or, alternatively, when I would ask what they believed the most meaningful or most valuable thing in life to be, they would often respond: “The whole family safe and harmonious and contributing something of value to society.”

What we can understand of spirituality or spirit is without doubt deeply rooted in social and community experience, and these societies and communities are permeated with the influence of a centuries-old culture. If we aspire to work effectively with geographically and culturally diverse populations, we need to set aside our personal preconceptions about the world. We need to enter authentically into the local community and observe their mode of life on a daily basis, along with their folk customs and taboos. We must go to live with them, to listen to the myths and legends of their families and their community and consider how these stories influence their spirits and construct their understanding of the ultimate meaning of life.

The notion of spirituality represents a diverse range of experiences, including one’s sense of responsibility to one’s family and culture as well as a spiritual connection to one’s ancestors. It is essential that we observe carefully the ways in which different forms of

spiritual experience influence community members' perception and understanding of the world in which they live. When we arrived to begin working with the traumatized and grieving survivors of the earthquake, the Western model of mental illness was only one component of our approach. Additionally, we entered into the community to experience and perceive its inner workings for ourselves, using our deep inner wells of empathy to listen to and feel the pulse of the community.

In this cultural environment, the loss of one's relatives and loved ones is equivalent to the loss of one's own life. Why was it that so many women in the refugee settlement, despite being far beyond their fertile years, were nonetheless determined to get pregnant and have another child of their own? Why weren't some of them willing to consider adopting a child? There is an old saying in China: "Blood is thicker than water." This idiom symbolizes a spiritual connection with the past and future based on genealogy. We must come to appreciate the deeply personal and cultural spiritual resonances of the problems that our patients bring to us. At the same time, we must set aside any preconceptions based on what so-called "science" tells us are the dimensions of so-called "illness." To view an individual as simply suffering from "PTSD," "depression," or "grief" is both naive and clinically limiting. We must not rely simply on "science" and our so-called "scientific methods" to help our patients. In a disaster of this scale, people lose their system of meaning, and the site of greatest trauma is often spiritual, not biochemical. We must enter into their cultural world to observe, listen to, and feel how people in the affected culture deal with their problems. Take, for example, the families who lost all their children in the earthquake. What they lost was the hope of their entire family line, the continuance of which is a responsibility they carry for centuries of ancestors. We can see that they lost the spirituality that is carried by the blood lineage and the primal role of the family.

In addition, we cannot address all problems on the basis of the so-called ethics and standards of our times. For instance, in the case of the traumatized woman of Case Five whose husband was unfaithful, many social workers might try to help her gain more rights and benefits, be independent, and even end the marriage. However, we need to be more prudent and more careful. In her spiritual life, she has strong faith, and she also obtained her identity and significance from the entire community, which supported her in the days when she suffered an amputation after the quake as well as the abuse of her husband. Home has become the pillar of her spiritual life. It is the appeal of her spirituality speaking when she cried out, "I will be happy if my children come back home at festivals and stay with me." When we take that away from her in a way that we believe to be justified, we leave her with nothing but endless miseries and an empty desert in her heart.

Also, we find in clinical work that culture and language often construct one's spiritual life. Different cultures help with recovery from trauma by different approaches, and different cultures also lead to different ways of expression. We need to understand a culture's language system as well as the meaning or appeal behind people's words. When a survivor in a mountainous area who lost her family in the earthquake said, "Many times when I passed the river, I was thinking of nothing but wanting to jump into it," maybe we need to understand or carefully feel what messages her words convey to us, rather than simply putting her in the group of depressed patients at risk of suicide. Given the community's cultural background, her words mean life, not suicide. She was telling us how she went completely to pieces and how she missed her family and even wanted to dedicate her life to them. She was expressing her love for the deceased. In this way, she was telling us about her connection to the spirituality of the deceased. In addition, during our interaction with community members, the methods and approaches we resort to must find their source in their community and their spiritual life. Only those approaches rooted and grounded within



the community's own spiritual life, from their culture and community, can be effective and appropriate. We need to rely on our professional reflections and creativity instead of copying approaches from textbooks.

When we encounter people in crisis, we cannot take them out of their cultural background, and we cannot use our standards to think about or treat them; they belong to their culture, and we need to understand their spirituality from within their culture and community. In Chinese culture, an individual does not belong only to themselves; they belong to their family and belong to their community, and they are part of their community and part of their family. We are other people's self objects. Self objects are external objects that function as part of the "self machinery," i.e., objects which are not experienced as separate and independent from the self. They are persons, objects, or activities that "complete" the self and are necessary for normal functioning. Their meaning system is constructed in the family and community relationship. They live not just for themselves; they live for the meaning they give others. Their spirituality does not only belong to them; their spirituality belongs to their family and their community. Particularly when we worked with the men in the settlement, their pain was not only related to trauma, but also to the trauma related to the loss of their meaning, such as their sense that they cannot support their family when their child has passed away. How can we begin to help them recover from the traumatic situation? We need to understand and adapt to their cultural background and meaning system.

I traveled to the earthquake area to offer free clinical psychological services and psychiatric services. But I did not have many people asking me for help. In contrast, survivors went to see traditional Chinese medical doctors in an endless stream. I was curious about this, so I talked with some of those who sought help from Chinese traditional medical doctors. It surprised me that most of them were suffering from depression, anxiety, PTSD, and psychosomatic problems. Why would they not accept the psychological services available in the community? Is traditional Chinese medicine better than western psychological or mental health services? We are not sure! But we can conclude that psychological services must be connected with the culture and that we should get close to the people's daily life and their spiritual life, just like the Chinese traditional medicine doctor does, because traditional Chinese medicine is rooted in the community's belief system. Chinese people get used to it, and they believe it!

After the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the survivors were their own therapists. They reached down into their own psyche, culture, and spirituality in order to deal with their catastrophic losses. When we stayed with them, we witnessed the process in which a community entered a new spiritual life. In the process of reconstruction after the earthquake, as could be readily seen, cultural elements, such as sayings passed down from older generations, folk adages, well-known proverbs, and legends and stories handed down by the family or the culture helped survivors cope with the crisis they had been confronted with. Every important traditional festival remained unchanged. The only change may be the Earthquake Anniversary on May 12, on which people come from all directions to visit their children or other family members lost in the quake. On that special occasion, they will invite friends and relatives or bring their entire family to the cemetery, burning incense or joss paper (paper money) as a way to extend their deep love to the deceased. In everyday life, they have to hide their sadness. However, on this special day, the survivors put down all disguises and let out their sorrow or emotions in the way established by their culture.

In China, spirituality in community serves as a deep bond between the family system and the culture and faith system, penetrating behavioral habits and individual experiences in everyday life. It is easy to tell when the Spring Festival comes; no matter where we are, our minds will be filled with the idea of "going home." We can go back home at any time in the

year, so why do we feel we have to make that trip at that particular moment in time? No matter how far away the Chinese people are from home, they will try all means to go back during the Spring Festival to visit their parents and other family members. On my way home one year, I met a 60-year-old rural couple, and we talked on the train. I asked them why they had decided to go home though train tickets had been difficult to acquire and they would only be able to spend a few days in their hometown. The husband told me, “When I get back home, I feel like a totally different person with high spirits. When the train is about to get to my home, I feel myself revived.” The wife said they were close to everything at home—the mountain, water, vegetables, and people—and they were familiar with the lifestyle there. Most importantly, Chinese culture is constructed on the basic unit of family, with the fundamental and core bond being the blood tie. All cultures, folk customs, and traditions will find their roots in family and be bounded by blood relationship. A community often comprises families with kinship. Members of the community are connected with each other by the deepest relation of blood. Only in the community where they grew up can they find their inner and original connection to life and to the meaning of the expression that blood is thicker than water.

Spirituality provides people with a personal experience that is beyond personal significance and is in accord with their family and cultural background. Through such personal experience that is in conformity with culture and customs, and by close connection between one’s spiritual life and customs and taboos through everyday practice, individuals are integrated and connected to the community and culture.

Spirituality also comes as a sense of support and a source of hope through community culture. It helps members get blended into the family and community. Community members feel connection from mutual support and obtain power from others’ stories. They comfort each other under the great banyan trees of the community, listen to each other in fields when they work, and invite each other to religious or sacrificial activities of the community. In such a process of mutual assistance, they find support and develop inner strength. Through words and behaviors, they follow the requirements of the culture for their spiritual life. They cultivate understanding and respect from other members of the community and in this way share the vicissitudes of life with the community. The spirit of the community, mutual assistance between people, friendship passing down through the generations, and faith in their community neighbors inspire us to explore and experience the way people in communities help each other and also help us to understand that the meaning behind all this is life.

In order to understand the spirituality and culture of the Chinese people, it is necessary to enter into the community. But this cannot be done without walking into the families and watching and experiencing their stories. Multiple factors have caused changes in the social and natural environment after the 2008 earthquake. People’s living conditions have changed, and so have their lifestyles. However, the spiritual life of families has never deviated from its ancient but determined course. When my team visited a new family, the relationships and their beliefs remained the same. The faith in their spiritual life was still there. In Chinese culture, an individual is considered to be a part of an overall entity, of society and of spiritual life. We cannot divide individuals into separate parts without connections to others. I believe this would be a huge fallacy or confusion of modern psychiatry. In Western culture, we keep talking about PTSD or depression or grief complications, and we put too much attention on the symptoms without taking people’s spiritual needs into consideration. This is not the case in Chinese culture. Obviously, we are part of nature. We are spiritual creatures living in the world, and we have our spirituality. This is our major difference from other creatures. For people facing a crisis, what they have lost is not just their family or property. Most important is the fact that they have lost a fixed meaning system that had occupied a central position

in their life. Their meaning system had been nourished and sustained through their entire spiritual life.

It has been 3 years since the earthquake. What we have seen is that the PTSD patients have gradually recovered and brought themselves back into life. Some of them may still suffer from symptoms, and some have begun a new life within their own culture. As for the so-called symptoms, they won't be a problem if the so-called patients—such as families who lost children or survivors who had amputations—can find a new meaning system within their new life. Even if they are older than optimum childbearing age, they still keep trying and even risk their lives to give birth to a child. Also, handicapped people do not give up hope but try their best to stand up or move around the community. For them, the most important thing is the appeal to and sustaining power of their spirituality.

When I saw local villagers singing folk songs while working and dancing in Guozhuang, or when I saw brave women smiling to the light of their lives and holding their children standing in the dawn of an early spring, then I thought of the words of the English poet Shelley: "If winter comes, will spring be far behind?" In China, we believe that though the winter is long, we can have a better, more meaningful life. I believe that spring means hope; when survivors of a disaster begin to step into life, they begin to reconstruct their spiritual connection with life. So we can see that they live their spirituality. It seems that we almost forget about living itself. Whoever is affected by a disaster needs ultimately to get back to living, and living itself is the best treatment. To be engaged with life is the spirituality of the survivors of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. When I saw a simple and honest man who had lost his children in the earthquake lifting a pair of newborn children to his shoulders, I knew that this was an example of his spiritual life. Spirituality consists of being a father, being a mother, being parents, being a person in one's community.

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