

# INTERNATIONAL REPORTING PROJECT

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## The Law of Unintended Consequences

By Louise Lief | August 11, 2010 | IRP



2008 Sichuan earthquake damage

photo: Wikimedia Commons

The Chinese state excels at keeping tabs on its population, stifling dissent and imposing its will. But as became clear throughout our visit, millions of Chinese are also remarkably inventive at subverting the many regulations that govern their lives. “The policies come from above, the way around them comes from below,” goes an old Chinese saying still very much in use today. Because so many laws are imposed from above, applicable to some but not the well connected, many people have no compunction about trying to circumvent them. Says June Mei, our interpreter, “You have 500 million people trying to game the system.”

The Chinese government's efforts to implement policies, even laudable ones like pollution controls and mine safety, continually bump up against this reality. When the government issued a ruling that provincial officials would also be judged on their ability to improve safety in the coal mines that supply much of China's energy needs, officials stopped reporting mining accidents. Companies improve their pollution control efforts by reporting factory wastewater discharge rates at night, when the facilities are closed. This past year, when the government tried to control runaway housing prices by setting a limit of one home purchase per family, the divorce rate spiked.

## **A Determined State and Its Engineers**

This is not to say that the Chinese government doesn't have and use powerful tools at its disposal. Everyone is familiar with China's efforts to censor the Internet, ban Facebook, Youtube and Twitter, and banish Google. But China, primarily for commercial reasons, also decided to make Internet and mobile phone access widely available throughout the entire country, and it has. Whether it was in remote mountain villages or rural farms, most everyone we met had access to both, causing some of the editors on our trip familiar with the Internet and mobile phone reception issues in rural America to marvel. Tens of millions of Chinese Internet and mobile phone users are coming online each year.

China's earthquake relief efforts in Sichuan province also harnessed the tremendous powers of a determined centralized state. In May 2008 a 7.9 magnitude earthquake shook the province, killing 80,000 people and damaging or destroying towns, roads, bridges and other basic infrastructure that affected millions. The central government assigned each of China's prosperous eastern coastal provinces an area in the earthquake zone to rebuild, with the result that it became a competition among the coastal provinces to see which one could do the fastest, most elegant reconstruction job. It's as if New York, California and other states were each assigned to rebuild one of the wards in New Orleans damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

When I visited the Sichuan county seat of Dujiangyan in January 2009, virtually the entire center of this town of 600,000 was either rubble or so heavily damaged the buildings could not be occupied. When I came back a year later in January 2010, the entire downtown had been rebuilt with block after block of gleaming four-story office blocks and condominiums. During our gatekeeper trip, the villages we passed north of the Sichuan city of Pengzhou on our way into the mountains, many of them beautifully rebuilt in traditional styles in wood or stone, displayed banners thanking Fujian province for helping them to rebuild.

Chinese government officials, members of a generation of engineers, love to build things. The harder the task, the more they yearn for it. In Sichuan province, a region of steep mountains where transportation is difficult, instead of building roads around the mountains, officials have decided to go through them. Traveling on just one stretch of road in Sichuan's mountainous region during one of my scouting trips I passed through at least five tunnels, each over a mile long, that went through piercing, forbidding peaks, and saw more such tunnels nearby. It's great news for the giant pandas in the region, who will not have their shrinking habitats sliced up by a network of roads, and represents an enormous expenditure and engineering feat.



Many Chinese mountain tunnels are more than nine miles long. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Now, whether these beautiful new buildings and tunnels will withstand a future earthquake is another matter. One of the worst tragedies of the 2008 earthquake was the large number of shoddily built school buildings that collapsed, killing thousands of school children. Rather than punish those responsible, which would have afforded the state a measure of credibility, officials protected their own, and instead persecuted the grieving parents who demanded accountability.

In fact, some Chinese and American scientists believe that it was the construction of a dam and reservoir near the earthquake's fault line, another manifestation of China's engineering zeal, that [may have triggered the 2008 quake.](#)

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