

Class Activity: China's Unnatural Disaster: The Tears of Sichuan Province

Laura Altinsoy

Lesson Overview

This activity explores the intersection of natural disasters, political accountability, and state-society relations, as well as local and central state government relations through the lens of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Students will analyze how human decisions, corruption, and demographic policies turned a geophysical event into an "unnatural" catastrophe.

Learning Objectives

- **Analyze** the concept of "unnatural disaster"—how human decisions turn natural events into catastrophes.
- **Evaluate** the tension between citizens' demands for justice and a state's focus on "social stability."
- **Identify** the physical and political evidence of "tofu-dreg" construction.
- **Deconstruct** the complex power dynamics between local cadres and the central government.

Part 1: The Forensic Investigation (Video Analysis)

Activity: Watch the first 15 minutes of the primary documentary.

- **Prompt:** Identify specific "forensic" complaints made by parents regarding the school buildings.
- **Key Detail:** Highlight scenes where parents demonstrate that the bricks have no adhering cement and the rebar is thin/brittle.
- **The "Tofu-Dreg" Metaphor:** If "tofu-dreg" refers to the literal crumbly material of the schools, what does it suggest about the "material" of the local government? Is the local bureaucracy also "shoddy" and "hollow"?

Part 2: Deliberating the Title: Why "Unnatural"?

The title is a rhetorical provocation. Use this section to lead a seminar-style discussion on the following three pillars:

- **"Act of God" vs. "Act of Man":** As one parent notes, "If it were a natural disaster, we would have no complaints... but look at this brick, it's like it was washed in water". The "unnatural" element is the **avoidable failure** of the infrastructure.
- **The One-Child Multiplier:** The disaster is "unnatural" due to the demographic context. The **One-Child Policy** meant the death of a student was often the "extinction" of a family line, making the loss feel socially engineered.

- **Corruption as a Force of Nature:** Suggest that corruption is a structural force as powerful as tectonic plates. When seismic retrofitting funds are diverted, the resulting deaths are a direct outcome of political choice.

Part 3: Central-Local Dynamics & "Rightful Resistance"

The documentary illustrates the "Good Emperor, Bad Officials" trope common in Chinese political history.

1. The Local Government: The "Buffer" and "Enforcer"

- **Villains in the Rubble:** Parents blame local "corrupt officials" for taking bribes and ignoring codes.
- **Stability Maintenance:** Local authorities block parents from reaching higher offices to protect their own careers. If a petition reaches Beijing, local officials are punished for failing to "contain" the unrest.

2. The Central Party: The "Aspirational Justice"

- **Appealing to the Top:** Parents shout, "I hope the Central Committee sends someone to investigate". This is "**Rightful Resistance**"—the belief that the Center is just, but is being "lied to" by local cadres.
- **The State's Dilemma:** Beijing must choose between punishing local officials to satisfy the public or backing them to prevent a "domino effect" of national protests.
- **The Outcome:** The state eventually chose order over accountability, jailing activists like Tan Zuoren who documented the names of the dead [Supp. Material 1, 00:06:50].

Part 4: Governance vs. Grief (Role Play/Debate)

Activity: Compare the parents' protests with the official response.

- **Group A (Advocates):** Using Tan Zuoren's perspective, argue why an independent report is a necessity for public safety and human rights.
- **Group B (State Framework):** Using the official dialogue, argue why "self-rescue" and "national image" are prioritized over investigations to maintain order after a 7.9 magnitude quake.

Part 5: Assessment / Homework Assignment

The "One-Child" Impact Essay (500 words): The documentary notes that many victims were only children. Write a reflection on how China's One-Child Policy intensified the political stakes of

this disaster. How does losing a "lone" child change a parent's willingness to risk arrest and state suppression?

Key Resources & Links

- **Primary Film:** [China's Unnatural Disaster: The Tears of Sichuan Province \(HBO\)](#)
- **Supplementary Material 1:** [Democracy Now! Interview with Directors John Alpert & Peter Kwang](#)
- **Supplementary Material 2:** [Brief Summary & Footage of the 2008 Earthquake Impact](#)