

*Who Killed Our Children?*

The Anatomy of a Protest Film

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[Preliminary draft: Not for citation or quotation]

Protest is a very complicated subject. Protest can take many forms. Self-immolation can be a kind of protest. Deliberate foot-dragging in the work place can be a form of protest. Public demonstrations, letter writing, graffiti sprawls, joke telling, production sabotage, and petitioning can constitute protest behavior. One can easily imagine a lively debate about precisely what qualifies as an act of protest. Some modes of protest are inexpensive to mount while others are costly. Some protests occur spontaneously, while others are planned in advance. Is the target of a protest always clear? Whose interests do protestors represent? What are the goals of protestors?

Is there such a thing as a protest film? It seems to me that *Who Killed Our Children?* (谁杀了我们的孩子?), a ninety-two minute documentary film completed in early fall 2008 by director Pan Jianlin (潘剑林 b. 1969), is an unambiguous case of a protest film - - no matter how one defines the term. The film is set in the immediate aftermath of the great Sichuan earthquake of spring 2008. But rather than try to tell a horrific, macrocosmic story of a human disaster that cost the lives of as many as 80,000 people, it seeks to investigate major systemic problems in China by looking very closely at a microcosmic event related to the collapse during the earthquake of a single school dormitory at the Muyu Middle School (木鱼初级中学) in Muyu township (木鱼镇),

Qingchuan county (青川县), almost 300 kilometers northeast of Chengdu along the provincial border that separates Sichuan from southern Gansu. Pan Jianlin clearly decided that in this particular case the best way to speak out, especially given the special characteristics of visual media and visual images, was to explore in great detail a very carefully framed local case.

It is also quite clear that the decision to make this film was spontaneous. There is no evidence that the filmmaker intended from the outset to make a protest film. There were no opportunities for advance planning, fund raising, or the leisurely crafting of an artistic vision. No one could have predicted the earthquake. This massive 8.0 quake struck without warning at 2:28 p.m. on the afternoon of May 12, 2008. Based in Beijing, the thirty-eight year old Pan Jianlin, a former law student who started making independent films in 1999, decided almost immediately to go to the disaster area. Indeed, despite serious transportation and communication challenges, he arrived from Beijing at ground zero on May 18, six days after the quake. He then spent ten straight days shooting film in his capacity as an independent (non-state sector) filmmaker, finishing this initial round of work on May 28. Thanks to digital technology, there was no need for cumbersome equipment or a large film crew.

Initially, the disaster region was wide open to volunteers and aid workers of all sorts. This unexpected openness left a highly favorable impression around the nation and across the world. But at a certain point, Chinese state functionaries began expressing concern about Pan's activities. Pan visited the region at least one more time before it was sealed off to unofficial visitors on June 2. He returned to Qingchuan county one more time on June 7 to interview officials. He indicates at the close of his film that he was

“forcibly taken by local police agents” and “illegally detained” for two days and two nights at the Lizhou Branch Station of the Guangyuan City Public Security Bureau (广元市公安局), a half-hour east of Qingchuan county. Twenty-seven of his videos were confiscated. Upon his return to Beijing he began laboring on the editing of his surviving materials. Pan later stated, “People have contacted my relatives and friends and told them to put pressure on me to stop my work.”<sup>1</sup>

*Who Killed Our Children?* was completed in September 2008 and its world premiere public screening was not in China, but at the Thirteenth Pusan International Film Festival in South Korea in early October. Pan Jianlin attended the Pusan premiere. He noted at the time that “there is zero chance” of the film being shown in China. “The content is too sensitive,” he concluded.<sup>2</sup> This caused one reviewer who covered the Pusan festival to describe Pan’s film as “the best reporting on the Sichuan earthquake you’ll never see.”<sup>3</sup> It appears there was an unpublicized “guerrilla screening” of the film in November 2008 at the Beijing International Film Festival, and it was shown at the 2008 Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival and to a full house at the Singapore Independent Documentary Film Festival in March 2009. But clearly, opportunities to see what turned out to be a controversial protest film have been few and far between so far.

The controversy swirling around *Who Killed Our Children?* leaves the impression that the movie is a highly confrontational, in-your-face, critical broadside turned out by a dissident artist. Nothing could be further from the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> TVNZ.CO.NZ, November 1, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Angilee Shah, “The Best Reporting on the Sichuan Earthquake You’ll Never See,” *The China Beat*, October 25, 2008.

*Who Killed Our Children?* turned out to be a protest film, but it is measured, balanced, and fair. The voices of all social groups - - including the military, local officials, the police, ordinary citizens and even children - - are heard in every segment. The film is heartbreaking, but there is nothing sensational, misleading, or heavy handed about it. Viewers are allowed to draw their own conclusions. Perhaps that is why the film cannot be viewed publically in China. This is a protest film, but it shows that protest films do not necessarily start out as protests and are not required to be shrill.

### A Natural Calamity

The first segment of *Who Killed Our Children?* makes no accusations. It simply describes the results of a natural disaster for which no one can be blamed. If anything, its estimates are on the low side: 68,109 dead, 19,851 missing, and 364,552 injured. It factually refers to the “shocking and heartbreaking” collapse of “large numbers” of middle schools, elementary schools, and kindergartens that buried “tens of thousands of students.” According to the film, the Muyu Middle School, a boarding school with a dormitory, had 851 students and 62 staff. The principal is Dong Jinlun (董进伦). On the day of the quake, 846 students were present. Pan Jianlin estimates that 286 students died, while 97 were rescued from the ruins.

After the numbers are given, Pan’s camera simply surveys the scene of devastation he found six days after the quake. Pan resorts to this type of sequence throughout the film. No local voices are heard, no didactic or preachy voice-over narration is offered. No one is telling viewers what to believe. One simply looks at mind-warping scenes of destruction at ground zero - - close ups of the rubble that was

once a school, complete with children's backpacks, shoes, and photo albums mixed in with mountains of wreckage. Then we see sobbing parents and elders holding photos and ID cards of dead children. It is not until 4 minutes and 40 seconds into the film that we start to hear voices - - somewhat random, sound bite testimonies offered by eyewitnesses. A distraught officer in uniform says: "The scene was unbearable" and "The cement and plaster crumbles between your fingers. What kind of school construction is that?" A grieving parent asserts that "600 or 700" children died. A schoolgirl says she saw bodies "some without heads, without hands...some without feet." Another soldier in uniform mentions that "Several hundred excavated bodies filled the entire athletic field." A parent says that there was "no one tending to the bodies." A woman states that some bodies were buried before identities could be established. For more than seven minutes, the initial part of this film speaks almost entirely of a monumental natural tragedy in a remote location and the inevitable human chaos that followed.

### Locked Doors?

At this point the film begins to raise disturbing questions about human culpability in the toll of dead children. Yes, there was a terrible natural disaster, but could the death toll among innocent children have been lower, much lower? Students at the Muyu Middle School take a nap between 12:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. each school day. One of the most profound cruelties of the 8.0 earthquake was that it struck at precisely 2:28, two minutes before the end of the nap period.

Pan Jianlin discovered many parents who are convinced that the main dormitory door was always locked from the outside during nap period and that it was locked when

the quake struck, making it extremely difficult for terrified students to get out of the building. Again, Pan provides no authoritative voice-over designed to answer the question in a definitive way. It is a soldier in uniform who says, “The middle school dormitory locks up its doors for the noontime nap. Otherwise many would have escaped.... Almost all [the dead] were at the stairwell and hallway.” Multiple grieving parents testify along similar lines, with one woman saying, “Some kids tried to bite the locks open.” An extremely angry man who lost his son says, “Locking the door is an irrational educational method!”

Pan Jianlin was wise to get the testimonies of soldiers and police officers. Their voices seem highly credible when heard on screen standing by the awful site of the school ruins. But throughout the film Pan also asks local official to offer commentary. In many cases, the local officials seem awkward. To their credit, they answer Pan’s questions, but it is clear that they are uncomfortable and are not at all used to being asked questions on camera by non-state sector investigators. The head of the county Education Department (教育局局长) - - name not given - - appears on screen multiple times. About the locked doors he says, “This is also a very sensitive issue.” “Whether it [the door] was locked or not – we don’t have a very detailed unequivocal answer.” When asked if the door was locked, a teacher simply says, “That’s impossible!”

Gripping and painful back and forth sound bites continue for almost ten minutes. A student insists that the door is always locked during naptime because students would “sneak out to Internet cafes.” The school principal, Dong Jinlun, says that an “on duty” teacher is required to stay in the dorm during naptime to keep an eye on things, but another student claims that the mid-day supervisor sometimes checks each room, then

goes home, locking the door from the outside. The principal then reappears, articulating a fall back position about the door: the door was locked, but it got opened right away when the quake struck. Even the county education director finally concedes, “It’s possible it was locked.” But it was “opened just in time.”

The point here is that Pan Jianlin’s approach seems fair and balanced in the introductory portions of the film. A sense of tragedy prevails, though it is easy for viewers to conclude that in the case of the “school door” it is entirely possible that the lives of some children were lost due to human conduct rather to a natural calamity. Human beings, not natural forces, should be held accountable for some of the deaths. At this point, *Who Killed Our Children?* begins, but only just begins, to surface as a protest film that takes the form of independent investigative journalism by a person who has legal training and filmmaking skills. But it is crucially important to point out that Pan Jianlin, like many independent filmmakers, does not consider himself to be a Cold War style dissident.

### Safe School?

Nearly 20 minutes into the film, Pan Jianlin raises a new and far more explosive question about human culpability. The first person to provide relevant testimony strikes us as highly credible: it is the very same unnamed teacher who vehemently denied in the first portion of the film that the main door of the school was locked. On the issue of the safety of the building, he heads in another direction, stating baldly, “If the students’ dormitory wasn’t an unsafe building...far fewer students would have died.” Another teacher added, “It was extremely substandard.” The grieving parents are furious about

this issue. One says, “They knew clearly it was an unsafe building.” Another adds, “It’s been an unsafe building for years.” Yet another says that if the building was so safe, “Why didn’t other buildings collapse?”

With the responses of local officials, we see a pattern emerge. It is easy for them to dismiss the comments of parents as speculative and based on rumor. One of the main concerns of local officials seems to be deflection of implicit and explicit allegations of human negligence and thus human responsibility for some, perhaps many, of the deaths. The head of the county education bureau - - always well composed in front of the camera - - states: “It’s not been confirmed with any certainty” that the building was a hazard. A new official interviewee - - the deputy head of the Muyu township disaster relief headquarters - - similarly equivocates: “It’s not clear if an appraisal was ever made.”

But it is soon established that the building is 41 years old (built in 1967 during the Cultural Revolution) and functioned for decades as a local-level medical unit. No one challenges the accuracy of this information. A teacher goes further and insists that the building was “classified hazardous for at least five years.” “The local government,” he adds, “knew it was unsafe.” Thus, for the first time in the film we hear a serious allegation. Local officials fidget. Principal Dong - - always nervous and defensive - - claims that everything collapsed, not just the school, so it must have been the force of the quake. As the pressure mounts, local officials no longer say that there was no hazardous construction report; they simply say they “never saw hazardous building reports.”

This exchange, like the one about whether the main door was locked, seems to end in a stalemate. Local officials have a degree of “deniability.” But then, a family member steps forward with an official document, dated February 24, 2006, found in the



rubble: “Hazardous Construction Self-Exam Report.” The protest thrust of the film is now clear to all, but it is not accompanied by any self-righteous voice-over. One just stares at the document.

### Shallow Graves

The next chapter of the film lasts less than five minutes. Parents tell Pan about how they had to bury their children as best they could under the awful circumstances that prevailed. They say they did the best they could with no resources. One woman estimates that between 400 and 500 children were buried in this way immediately following the quake. Then the filmmaker goes up onto a nearby hill and into a dense forest to see for himself. Once again, no voices are heard. The camera simply shows the viewer what Pan encounters. Simple graves topped by earthen mounds are everywhere. It is hard to comprehend the scale. The natural beauty of the forest clashes with the random, haphazard layout of the primitive graves. This grave indicates the name of the child in crudely written characters; that grave is decorated with the lovely child’s favorite stuffed animal. It is impossible to view this section without wondering how many of the children died because they could not get past a locked door and how many died because the school was a (known) safety hazard.

### How Many?

The next section of *How Killed Our Children?* devotes nearly fifteen minutes to the gruesome task of determining the body count. How many children died? This is a

reasonable and straightforward question. If there is nothing to hide and if it was a natural calamity, then there should be nothing controversial about getting an accurate number. What is interesting about this portion is that Pan Jianlin seems more than willing to use the official figure of 286 deaths at the school. One of the teachers uses this number, as does the head of the education bureau - - who is noticeably defensive about “rumors” that point to higher numbers. An officer in uniform uses a slightly higher number: 297. The man from the disaster relief headquarters becomes very agitated. There is no need to “conceal the earthquake’s earth toll!” It is a natural event, not a man-made event, so “There’s nothing to hide!” Hiding happens when people are responsible for deaths.

The problem with the working out of this grim calculus becomes apparent when ordinary citizens are asked to comment. One man says more than 500, another says 508, while still another says 470. A young man says “700-800.” Even the sensitive disaster relief official starts off with 400, then corrects himself by saying 300, then corrects himself again until he reaches the official 286 number. Locals counter with an estimate of “500-600.” “200 or so? That’s impossible!” “One shouldn’t hide the truth.” Another man states explicitly that Qingchuan county Party Secretary Li Haosheng is “still giving false death toll figures...He said it was about 300 kids.” One woman, insisting the number was 700-800, was far more blunt: “These fuckers are still covering up.” Principal Dong disagrees: “We provided factual and truthful information. There is no such cover up.” As in the earlier segments of the film, another “he said, she said” outcome appears to be on the horizon.

But then filmmaker Pan does something very straightforward, non-confrontational, and logical. He asks the excitable deputy head of the disaster relief

headquarters if there is a complete list of the dead children. The official immediately responds, “Yes.” Where is it kept? “At the school [headquarters].” Can you release it? “Yes! The school can show it to you. Anyone can see it.” But when Pan asks the head of the county education department to see the list, the awkward response is “It’s not convenient now.” “We can’t show it to you.” When Pan asks Principal Dong, the jittery Dong stammers, “It’s not convenient yet.” In one of the truly mesmerizing moments of this protest film, Pan says, “Why not?” The principal is literally speechless. For what seems like an eternity he babbles, “Ah.....ah.....ah....ah.....ah.....” It appears that no one has ever asked him - - on camera and for the public record - - a question of this sort. He is furious, but totally incapacitated and frozen in place so long as the camera is rolling. In this protest film, facial expressions are as revealing as spoken words.

In the end, Pan accepts the official number of 286 dead children. Why? This segment of the film is clearly not about establishing an accurate number of dead children. This would have been a futile goal for a filmmaker standing at ground zero in the days immediately following the disaster. Instead, what this portion of the film points to is the yawning gap that separates ordinary people from officialdom. Life has taught these people to distrust local officials and assume that they lie about everything - - even when they are not lying about everything. It is easy for local people to assume that the main door was locked, that the school was a shocking safety hazard, and that the number of children killed was 700-800.

## Graves, Part II

At this point in the film (half way to the end), the filmmakers are no longer just asking people what happened during and right after the quake. The filmmakers are now filming events as they unfold. They are participant-observers whose presence may not be welcome by local and regional officials. In brief, the filmmakers are now part of the drama that is unfolding.

One day, they notice something strange and mysterious going on in the hills where the children are buried. Pan is told by an outsider, “The area is off-limits to reporters today.” “You can’t film here.” But Pan disobeys this order and finds a way to go up into the hills anyway, an otherworldly place where scores of alien-like people in white bio-suits are busy at work. But it is not at all clear what is going on. Again, one hears no voices. Pan simply films scenes of massive earthmoving machines digging their way through the lush forest. They appear to be digging up bodies, but there is no confirmation of this. Grieving parents are nowhere in sight in this scared burial ground, and presumably have no knowledge of what is going on - - whatever it is. The whole sequence lasts three minutes. It is a confusing, and disorienting question mark in a film that otherwise moves along in a clear and logical order. Viewers are suddenly put in the position of local citizens - - something important is happening, but no one will tell them what it is.

#### Where is the Heavy Equipment?

Seeing the big machines doing so much work allows Pan Jianlin to raise another question - - this time about the rescue operation that was mounted immediately following the quake. By this time, the outcome of the discourse at ground zero is quite predictable.

Local people insist that little to nothing was done by the authorities after the quake hit at 2:28 p.m. Some witnesses suggest that it was a communications failure: “If they’d reported the true situation, more rescuers and ambulances would have come. They hid the number of trapped students.” The tendency of local officials to downplay and underestimate losses suffered during a disaster (in order to limit their exposure and thus protect their job security) is well documented in Jeremy Brown’s path-breaking research on the ways the socialist state has managed “accidents” in the period from the 1950s to the present day.<sup>4</sup> One parent says that at 3 p.m. when he got there, there “wasn’t a single teacher.” A uniformed officer states that a county-level rescue team arrived at 6 p.m., three and a half hours after the quake. Another says that early rescuers had no tools. “They dug with their hands.” Excavating equipment did not arrive until 1 a.m. on May 13. Not surprisingly, Principal Dong explains that communications “were out,” while the township disaster relief official notes that the “roads were bad.” Machinery had to come from Guangyuan, normally a half hour away by vehicle, but 6-7 hours away after the quake. A uniformed man says that heavy equipment did not arrive until late in the second day. Bulldozers were useless. Buried children would have been crushed by the horizontal movement of building ruins. Rescuers needed a crane, but the only crane was in a nearby market town called Shanzhen. On day three, rescue teams arrived from as far a way as Liaoning and Dalian.

Once again, it is easy to imagine the frustration of local officials who faced great difficulties mounting rescue operations. Yet one is struck by the skepticism and

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Brown, “When Things Go Wrong: Accidents and the Legacy of the Mao era in Today’s China,” in Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz, eds., *Restless China* (New York: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

bitterness of angry local people. One woman who lost her daughter says, “If they had reported the truth, and rescuers had rushed here, for certain she would still.....” Indeed there were several accounts of trapped children who perished while waiting to be saved. Between 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. on day two, a young girl was plucked from the ruins of the school. But there was no transportation equipment. The girl was put on a passing bus, but the bus was nearly out of gasoline as it approached Qiaozhuang. The bus was not given gasoline because the driver was required to have an allocation document signed by a government official. It took an hour to get the signature. Meanwhile the girl died. This horrendous segment of the film ends with a photo of the controversial gasoline permit eventually authorized by the Qingchuan county government.

### Mourning

The segment on the chaotic rescue effort is followed by another short series of painful and virtually silent images that do not include the voices of the grieving. Instead, for two minutes we are taken back to the scattered graves in the forest and allowed to view various daily use items - - including plastic bottles filled with water - - placed on graves for the use of the departed in the afterworld. Back down in the town, we see Buddhist monks and nuns praying for the dead children.

### Terror

Late in the evening of May 22, approximately four days after Pan Jianlin first arrived in Muyu township, unexplained panic sweeps through the community. Convoys of empty trucks arrive suddenly in the dark to evacuate uniformed soldiers and police.

Rumors quickly spread that a deadly epidemic is under way. A uniformed man in a local medical aid station says, “We came full of zeal wanting to help more people. But only by maintaining our own safety can we help others.” A local woman says, “All the doctors have withdrawn. There are no more doctors. They just left all the medicine here.” A soldier says, “The Red Cross has pulled out completely. Not just from here, but the whole area.” Up to that point, the aid station had been seeing approximately 200 patients a day, but now the outsiders are leaving suddenly and without explanation in the middle of the night.

Filming in almost total darkness, Pan Jianlin is able to capture a powerful sense of raw fear. Departing personnel whisper scary words of advice to Pan: “You must leave tonight!” “They’re going to seal off the area tomorrow morning!” “I’m telling you like a brother. Get out of here!” “Stop interviewing and tell your friends - - get out if you can.” “Being devoted doesn’t mean becoming a martyr.”

But Pan and his people do not depart. Newly arrived military police move into a makeshift garrison and the sounds of heavy machinery can be heard through the night. Is an epidemic spreading? Are more lives at risk? No one knows for sure.

### Public Relations Management - - An Ugly Debacle

From the point of view of documentary filmmaking, the following sequence is no doubt the most compelling portion of *Who Killed Our Children?* The filmmakers know they are filming something important, but they do not know exactly what is unfolding

and have no indication whatsoever of how local people are likely to react to the new developments. To everyone's surprise, including their own, the filmmakers witness and actually film a spontaneous, low-level popular rebellion.

It all starts when we see in the morning that the new military units on the scene have set up large tents. The military has donated the tents and wants to restart the school by bringing students into classes. The problem is that the whole thing is a propaganda stunt that is being filmed by the military for broadcast on CCTV, the state-controlled television network. The purpose of the staged event is to reassure citizens throughout the nation that the military is doing a great job in the quake area and that local people are content and most grateful. What is especially interesting about this sequence is that while the military crews are filming, Pan Jianlin and his team are filming the filming activities of the military. It is a movie within a movie.

Outside the tents, military personnel are filmed by a CCTV crew giving away brand new school backpacks to the children. The head of the education bureau, seen frequently in first half of the film, is filmed speaking at a ceremony and asking the children, "Anything to say in gratitude to the army?" Some children mumble stiff words of thanks, while others walk away. One of the serious problems with the ceremony, viewers soon learn, is that there are not enough surviving children, so approximately 100 children have been brought in from elsewhere to play the role of local students.

Inside a big tent, the ever smiling, uniformed leader of the propaganda film team tells the somber children that they will be able to see themselves on CCTV 1 in a day or two. He asks them to sing for the cameras. He asks them to sing the national anthem, failing to comprehend the ironic thrust of the lyrics: "Arise, ye who refuse to be slaves.



The Chinese nation faces its greatest danger. Arise, Arise!” At precisely this time, a group of enraged local people bursts into the tent, screaming at the military film crew. Military cameras are stopped, but Pan Jianlin’s camera keeps rolling, thus capturing this remarkable event. We are witnessing a mini-rebellion. “OUR CHILDREN ARE DEAD!!” “THIS IS A GRAVE!!” It is astonishing actually to see with our own eyes a sheepish military back down and beat a hasty retreat as the locals occupy the tent. Outside, the local people, including many bereaved parents, explode in anger. “Have the principal come out and answer to us!” “They say only 200 students died! But even they don’t believe that!” “JUST MORE LIES AND DECEPTION!...THEY’RE FUCKING BEASTS!”

### Graves, Part III

This sequence on the public relations disaster is immediately followed by an equally traumatic section that probes another shocking discovery. Local people have learned that the heavy machines laboring in the night were actually reburying the children who rested in the many simple hillside graves. The main concern of the authorities was public health. Many of the graves were too shallow and animals had easy access to the remains. The problem is that a command decision was made to keep this information from the grieving parents. Literally and figuratively, the parents were kept in the dark.

The explosion of emotion that follows is hard to describe. “We Chinese don’t bury people like this!” screams one man. Another citizen says, “What they’ve done is too inhuman. We are human beings. To do this, they’ve lost their humanity.” Another person wailed, “They should have notified us - - they were digging up the children!” As

Pan was filming these pitiful outbursts, there were still parents who had not heard the news about the fate of their children's bodies. Suspecting the worst, another man asserts, "They put all the bodies into one big trench. I guess they did this to cover up the number of corpses."

The crowd then decides spontaneously to go up into the wooded hills en masse to see for themselves: "We want to go have a look." Pan is with them as they pass by a new sign that says "No Admittance." The filmmakers and the people disobey. There are no officials to be found, no one to explain to the people what has happened. One man screams, "I'll kill the motherfuckers!"

There are no indications of where individual children are located. The markers put up by local people during the initial burials have disappeared or are scattered throughout the forest. One man finds his child's coffin and quilt, but no body. A woman wails, "I can't find my child!" "Where are the children?"

Pan Jianlin continues, as he has throughout the film, to give the local officials an opportunity to speak. And, to the credit of local officials, they are willing to go on camera in front of an independent filmmaker. The head of the education bureau insists that excavators were not used to move any bodies. He explains that there was a public health emergency and that informing the parents was not an option because many would have objected and failed to cooperate, making matters even worse. But by this point in the film, the gap between popular voices and official voices is just too great. No matter what the truth is, cynical viewers will believe everything the ordinary citizens say, while those viewers who support the main structures of the prevailing socialist system and are not inclined to oppose those structures will accept what the local officials are saying.

One type of viewer will say that the Muyu Middle School micro case exposes problems that are endemic to the system as a whole, while another type of viewer will say that the case depicted on screen, while tragic in nature, is an anomaly and does not represent what is typical. What makes this work a protest film, however, is the fact that the viewer gets to hear (and see) multiple versions of the story and in ways that are not controlled by state media outlets. Most viewers are not used to seeing local officials asked hard questions on camera and what these officials say and how they move their bodies is quite revealing.

This gut wrenching sequence is followed by yet another montage without any talking heads, a montage that simply shows warm and cute family photographs of the children who have perished. Parents cry uncontrollably and their grief is overwhelming. The filmmaker wants this section to be a memorial to the children.

### What Does it All Mean?

In the end the question about *Who Killed Our Children?* is not answered in any definitive way. Many factors seem to be in play. But there is little doubt that a cruel natural disaster is not responsible for all the deaths. Viewers are forced to think about what happened.

A volunteer aid worker, who is unnamed, is filmed reflecting on the meaning of the tragedy and the lessons to be learned. “This problem in China is pervasive,” he says, moving in analytical terms from the micro to the macro. “Northwest, North China, Central Plains, Southwest, etc., and underdeveloped areas.” “Why did so many children die? This is not a question of one school or a few corrupt officials.” The problem, he

asserts, has to be analyzed at the level of “systems” - - “at the level of the political system, the economic system, the budgetary system we must make rapid reforms.” Interestingly, he says that it is not a matter of putting more laws on the books, but a matter of the enforcement of existing laws. The schools were “just tofu buildings!” and there has to be a transparent investigation and accountability. A rule of law must prevail.

A final surprise toward the end of the film is the powerful and highly credible testimony of military officials in uniform. These are not dissidents or troublemakers. One distraught officer says, “We need to search our souls....There were many stories which should give us pause for thought.” He concludes, “If we don’t search our souls we will not be a great people.”

The film ends with three fragmentary segments. One involves the film crew visiting a small tent village where homeless locals are staying. One is struck at this point by the collective beauty and resilience of these people. The surviving children are adorable and their parents are seen trying their best to achieve wholeness and to put everything back together. It is a touching and powerful human tableau. Then we see an old timer working hard to read aloud a public letter to Premier Wen Jiabao and Chairman Hu Jintao that uses stiff, familiar, official language to profusely thank the Party and state for all their concern and help. Finally, the film ends with a long sequence of photographs of the departed children accompanied by the soothing sound of sacred hymns.

Pan Jianlin himself has reflected from time to time about the meaning of the Muyu Middle School case. Pan made various statements around the time the film was screened in South Korea. A New Zealand website quoted him as saying, “I’m absolutely certain the government has an unshrinkable responsibility.” “They [some of the children]

died wastefully.”<sup>5</sup> He adds, however, that his film does not make the claim that the views expressed by the local people he interviewed, including local officials, are either entirely true or entirely false. “So maybe everybody had some things in their stories that were true and some things that were not true.”<sup>6</sup> Still, he concludes, “The quality of these buildings was terrible. This is a big problem in China. Corruption is also a problem. It is shameful.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he asserts, the behavior of local officials is not hard to comprehend: “They have no experience and they want to keep their jobs. They just want to move things on and not face up to the problems.”<sup>8</sup>

At a certain level, the issues under review involve the concept of patriotism. On March 17, 2013, at his inaugural speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping said, “Patriotism is always the spiritual force bonding the Chinese nation together as strong and unified.”<sup>9</sup> But his comment begs the question. What does it mean to be patriotic, to love China? What constitutes patriotic behavior? Is it more patriotic to cover up problems so China and the ruling Communist Party do not look bad at home and abroad? Or is it more patriotic openly to acknowledge a social or cultural problem and deal with it directly in public forums? Will the government earn more respect and trust nationally and internationally by openly dealing with serious problems or by hiding them? David Shambaugh argued recently that dealing with serious problems openly and directly

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<sup>5</sup> TVNZ.CO.NZ, November 1, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> [www.vnaff.ca](http://www.vnaff.ca)

<sup>7</sup> [www.forums.soompi.com](http://www.forums.soompi.com)

<sup>8</sup> [www.koreaherald.com.kr](http://www.koreaherald.com.kr)

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Jacobs, “In China, New Premier Says He Seeks a Just Society,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2013, p. A4.

“would go much further” toward enhancing China’s image “than the billions of dollars the country is currently pumping into” its various soft power “propaganda efforts.”<sup>10</sup>

Pan Jianlin is an independent, non-state sector filmmaker. He and people like him do not work for the government or the Party. They are proud patriots. But they reject the idea that the patriotic thing to do is to cover up or pretend that various problems do not exist. “Officials don’t like independent filmmakers,” Pan Jianlin observes.<sup>11</sup> That is why he was pressured to terminate his project on the Muyu Middle School, and that is why much of his film material was confiscated. Ever vigilant, Pan anticipated that he might have such problems well before he was detained and his footage was confiscated. “I had made copies by then,” he said.<sup>12</sup>

*Who Killed Our Children?* is an effective and nuanced protest film. It does so by serving as a window on a broad range of issues that concern Chinese citizens today. The film seeks to give voice to those whose voices we rarely hear. The film functions as a protest film, but it does so by allowing all of those involved to voice their views in a public setting. One actually witnesses a broad debate about what happened and why so many children died in this one place. The film qualifies as a protest film, but it does so by adopting a patriotic stance. The filmmaker denies that he is a Cold War type dissident. Instead, his voice, like the voices of so many other concerned citizens, focuses on the law and rights that are guaranteed to citizens by the law.

Even before he completed the project, Pan Jianlin began work on a new protest film. While he was being detained for two days by the Public Security Bureau in

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<sup>10</sup> David Shambaugh, “Falling Out of Love with China,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2013, p. A23.

<sup>11</sup> Shah, “The Best Reporting on the Sichuan Earthquake You’ll Never See.”

<sup>12</sup> [www.forums.soompi.com](http://www.forums.soompi.com)

Guangyuan, he started work on a new script called “Natural Disturbance” that deals with the topic of what it is like to be in jail.<sup>13</sup>

What, if anything, has changed in the five years since the collapse of the school dormitory in Muyu township? It is hard to say. But one notes with dismay an item that appeared recently in *The New York Times*: “Last week a fresh round of outrage erupted after news spread that a carjacker in the northwestern city of Changchun had strangled a baby boy he had found in a stolen vehicle and then buried him in the snow. After thousands took to the streets for a candlelight vigil honoring the infant, the authorities banned further media coverage of the episode.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Shah, “The Best Reporting on the Sichuan Earthquake You’ll Never See.”

<sup>14</sup> Dan Levin, “In China, Cinematic Flops Suggest Fading of an Icon,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2013, p. A5.

