

# Yushu Diary: Back From the Edge

Aiding southwestern China after the earthquake and beyond

By Lee Weingrad Photos by the Surmang Foundation

## EARTHQUAKE STRIKES

Rising early on the morning of April 14th, I remember going downstairs, eating a bowl of corn flakes, turning on CNN and hearing that a 7.1 magnitude earthquake struck Chamdo, in the Tibet Autonomous Region. A few hours later, I learned the first report was wrong; the epicenter was not Chamdo, but Yushu, the trading town 120 km north of our clinic at Surmang. Now I was worried.

Chinese television confirmed my worst fears—the earthquake devastated an ancient 3500m-high town built of adobe and brick, a patchwork of alleyways and monasteries home to 120,000 people, at least 2000 of whom had perished.

I had returned to Yushu often since my first trip to Surmang in 1987—its dusty streets teeming with monks, beggars, yoghurt vendors and folk music blaring from dozens of broken-tweeter speakers; a kind of central Asian Star Wars bar scene. It seemed everyone shared the same first impression of Yushu's blooming, buzzing disarray. Another common observation on returning from Surmang is: "this place is special." I fell in love with it. Approximately 90 percent ethnic Khampa, it was also one of the most Tibetan places on Earth. By the time of the earthquake, I'd traveled to Yushu at least 25 times.

## AMCHAM-CHINA, BCG AND UNITED FAMILY HEALTHCARE

We had to do something. But what? Events moved fast and seemed to have a life of their own. I was inter-

viewed by BBC TV. Through CSR Chair Andy Andreasen, AmCham appealed to members for donations either to us or the Red Cross. We were offered and accepted Managing Director David Michael's invitation to move our operations to Boston Consulting Group's (BCG) downtown offices—putting us smack in the middle of downtown Beijing, providing us with greater access to the government and international businesses. We were assigned an office and a top consultant. We moved our computers from suburban Beijing and got to work.

Soon our partner, Chindex and United Family Healthcare (UFH) told us that they would donate over RMB 370,000 in cash and medical equipment. Amidst the fog of this disaster, UFH's donation gave me confidence and reassurance that we were on the right track.

## EMERGENCY ASSESSMENT

The question was how to join our resources and unique abilities together with the resources of the international business community to match the needs of disaster victims. How to interface with potential supporters such as AmCham members and BCG's clients? Fortunately, we had a very clear idea of where we could make the strongest impact: clinic construction and community-based rural health care delivery systems.

After a lot of discussion we decided to help rebuild stricken, rural township clinics in the epicenter catchment and roll out our unique health care delivery system to a few locations.



Since 1992, the Surmang Foundation (SF), a US non-profit, has been working in China to provide free quality health care to the ultra-poor of Qinghai. Partnering with the Qinghai Government in 1993, SF built a primary care clinic in Yushu County, Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai Province. Staffed by two local doctors and 40 community health workers, the Surmang Clinic has treated over 130,000 patients for free since 2000, with a focus on mother and child health. The organization has been a part of AmCham-China CSR since 2002 and the recipient of three Charity Ball grants.

Finally, the plan not only had form, but the Yushu Prefecture Government gave a preliminary go-ahead and invited us to Yushu.

In the face of the RMB four billion raised on TV telethons and other donations for a massive relief effort, it seemed that we made the right decision: development, not relief. The Chinese government had the right stuff—among the world's greatest first response resources—and we couldn't improve on that.

The first step was to visit the disaster site for an Emergency Assessment. Partnering again with Peking University Institute of Population Studies, we put together a team consisting of architect Ralph Allen, earthquake structural engineer Gary Swenson, MPH, EMT Jonathan Hall, trilingual interpreter Janis Tse Yong-gee, Operations Director Christie Huang, Gao Yu from PKU and myself. On June 5th we left for Yushu.

## YUSHU. JUNE 5

It was snowing when my first flight to Yushu touched down at Batang airport. The tips of my fingers were numb from the altitude medication. Clinic Director Phuntsok Dondrup met us at the airport. He was smiling, but looking older and more tired than when I last saw him in 2009. Later I would learn that he was stuck in his collapsed house for four hours and had to be dug out by hand. He had a cracked pelvis. (Find the video of his interview, "Yushu Tent City," at [www.surmang.org/media/videos.html](http://www.surmang.org/media/videos.html).)

On the way into town we stopped at the ancient Thrangu Monastery, an iconic cultural and spiritual center of

Yushu. About 200 monks were killed when the main assembly hall collapsed. I had seen it before; now only rubble. Then we went to the tent village where we would encamp for the next five days. In the afternoon, we drove into town—or what was left of town. I could hardly keep my bearings with almost all of the buildings collapsed to nothing. A solitary reference point was the 20-meter high bronze statue of the legendary eighth century King Gesar. It was surrounded by a sea of blue government relief tents, each a store standing in for the surrounding shopping center buildings that stood silently aside in ruin.

We stayed in a tent village near Phuntsok's extended family. It was cold and raining, but of the village was filled with human warmth, food and salty Tibetan butter tea there waiting for us. At night the temperatures hovered around freezing, and when mother nature called in the middle of the night, I had to make my way in the mud and rain past a row of tents, all of which had Great Dane-sized Tibetan mastiffs straining against their tethers in a bold attempt to eat me. I walked with rocks in my hands to the latrine, which was set atop a cross-hatching of beams so that I had to be careful not to lose my balance.

It was difficult for us and difficult for the people of Yushu. There was a definite pall over the town, but considering the extent of the damage and the social and personal upheaval, it seemed that everyone was doing well.

We had an appointment with Dr. Xiao Jiuga, the director of the Yushu Public Health Bureau, but finding his office was another matter. His office