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Wenchuan quake breaks the barriers

> **Sinking deltas** Human interference

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Overturning ozone Warming-induced flux

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Slip maxima at fault junctions and rupturing of barriers during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake

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The disastrous 12 May 2008Wenchuan earthquake in China took the local population as well as scientists by surprise. Although the Longmen Shan fault zone—which includes the fault segments along which this earthquake nucleated—was well known, geologic and geodetic data indicate relatively low (<**3 mm yr**[−]**¹) deformation rates. Here we invert Global Positioning System and Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar data to infer fault geometry and slip distribution associated with the earthquake. Our analysis shows that the geometry of the fault changes along its length: in the southwest, the fault plane dips moderately to the northwest but becomes nearly vertical in the northeast. Associated with this is a change in the motion along the fault from predominantly thrusting to strike-slip. Peak slip along the fault occurs at the intersections of fault segments located near the towns of Yingxiu, Beichuan and Nanba, where fatalities and damage were concentrated. We suggest that these locations represent barriers that failed in a single event, enabling the rupture to cascade through several fault segments and cause a major moment magnitude (***M***w) 7.9 earthquake. Using coseismic slip distribution and geodetic and geological slip rates, we estimate that the failure of barriers and rupture along multiple segments takes place approximately once in 4,000 years.**

The 12 May 2008 Wenchuan earthquake was the largest seismic event in China in more than 50 years. It devastated cities along the northwest margin of the Sichuan basin (Fig. [1\)](#page-7-0), causing fatalities of more than 80,000 (ref. he 12 May 2008 Wenchuan earthquake was the largest seismic event in China in more than 50 years. It devastated cities along the northwest margin of the Sichuan basin [\(Fig.](#page-2-0) [1\)](#page-2-0), occurred on the Longmen Shan fault zone, which is predominantly a convergent zone with a dextral component, separating the Sichuan basin from the eastern margin of the Tibetan plateau^{[2](#page-7-1)}. Three major subparallel faults have been mapped to constitute the northeast trending Longmen Shan fault zone: the Pengguan fault (PGF) is to the east along the mountain front, about 10–15 km to its west lies the Beichuan fault (BCF) and the Wenchuan–Maowen fault lies about another 30 km west of the BCF [\(Fig.](#page-2-0) [1;](#page-2-0) ref. [3\)](#page-7-2). All of the faults are northwest dipping, with the BCF and PGF converging into the same ramp system in the mid-crust^{2-[5](#page-7-3)}. Field geological studies found evidence of Holocene activity at least for the central PGF and BCF (refs [6](#page-7-4)[–9\)](#page-7-5). The geological-fault slip-rate estimates, however, are fairly low, about 0.3–0.6 mm yr⁻¹ of reverse and ~1.0 mm yr⁻¹ dextral faulting for the BCF, and 0.2 mm yr[−]¹ reverse faulting for the PGF, averaged over the past ∼10,000 years (ref. [10\)](#page-7-6). Such low slip rates are consistent with Global Positioning System (GPS) estimates of the shortening rate across the Longmen Shan range of $<$ 3 mm yr⁻¹ (refs [11,](#page-7-7) [12\)](#page-7-8) or 1.5±1.0 mm yr⁻¹ (ref. [13\)](#page-7-9).

Seismological studies indicate that the Wenchuan mainshock started on the BCF about 30 km southwest of Yingxiu, and propagated unilaterally northeastward^{[14](#page-7-10)}. Surface breaks are found along both the BCF and PGF (refs [3,](#page-7-2) [15](#page-7-11)[–17\)](#page-7-12). The BCF branches into two segments east of Yingxiu, where the primary segment strikes southwestward and the other strand strikes westward through Yingxiu [\(Fig.](#page-2-0) [1\)](#page-2-0). Both segments ruptured during the earthquake, and the largest surface slip of ∼6.2 m vertical and ∼4.5 m dextral motion is found along a ∼20 km stretch of the fault northeast of the branching point^{[3](#page-7-2)}. There were no mapped fault surface breaks for ∼7 km northeast of this 20 km stretch, beyond which rupture was observed along two conjugate segments, one along the primary BCF trending northeast, and the other (the Xiaoyudong segment) trending southeast and connecting to the PGF [\(Fig.](#page-2-0) [1\)](#page-2-0). Another peak of coseismic surface offsets on the BCF is found near Beichuan, with 6.5 m vertical and 2.5 m dextral motion, respectively^{[3](#page-7-2)}. It is located at a fault juncture, where the BCF bends ∼25◦ clockwise and almost intersects with the Wenchuan–Maowen fault. Yingxiu and Beichuan suffered from the greatest fatalities (∼7,700 deaths at Yingxiu with a population of about 12,000 (ref. [18\)](#page-7-13), and ∼5,500 deaths at Beichuan with a population of less than 20,000; ref. [19\)](#page-7-14) and most severe structural damage in the earthquake. The maximum surface offset along the PGF is ∼3.5 m, mainly in the vertical component^{[3](#page-7-2)}.

The surface breaks along the BCF trace from ∼20 km southwest of Yingxiu (30.95° N, 103.45° E) to ~10 km southwest of Qingchuan (32.50° N, 105. 20° N), for a total length of \sim 235 km (ref. [3\)](#page-7-2). Aftershocks, however, extend beyond both ends of the surface rupture for another 55 and 30 km, respectively [\(Fig.](#page-2-0) [1\)](#page-2-0). This suggests that a significant portion of the fault rupture did not break to the surface at both ends, and the rupture could be as long as ∼320 km. Seismic moment released during the mainshock was measured at 7.6×10^{20} N m by the United States Geological Survey, corresponding to $M_w = 7.9$ (ref. [20\)](#page-7-15). Teleseismic studies indicate unilateral propagation along a 280-kmlong rupture, with two slip maxima of about 9 m at ∼10 km

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Figure 1 | Tectonic setting of the Wenchuan earthquake. The study region covered by the InSAR images is depicted in the inset map. The areas covered by ALOS (with phased-array-type L-band synthetic aperture radar (PALSAR) sensor) paths 470–477 and Envisat satellite (with Advanced Synthetic Aperture Radar (ASAR) sensor) track 290 are shown as white dashed and white solid rectangles respectively. Black and red lines indicate regional faults and surface traces of coseismic rupture^{[3](#page-7-2)}. Green and yellow triangles denote GPS stations whose horizontal-only and horizontal+vertical coseismic offsets are used, respectively. Two mainshock focal mechanism solutions are from United States Geological Survey and Global CMT, respectively. The white and yellow circles show *M* > 4.7 earthquakes of the past century and the Wenchuan aftershocks, respectively. WMF, Wenchuan–Maowen fault.

depth between Yingxiu and Wenchuan and between Beichuan and Pingtong, respectively^{[14](#page-7-10)}.

Coseismic deformation observed using GPS and InSAR

In this study we use GPS data collected and processed by our group and others and Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar (InSAR) measurements from the Advanced Land Observation Satellite (ALOS) and Envisat satellites (see the Methods section) to constrain the geometry and slip distribution of a coseismic rupture model. Only small amounts of postseismic deformation are included in the surface displacement measurements (see the Methods section). The largest coseismic displacement observed by GPS (2.4 m west-northwestward horizontal motion and 0.68 m downward vertical motion, respectively), is measured at a site located near Beichuan on the footwall side and about 2 km from the surface rupture [\(Fig.](#page-3-0) [2a](#page-3-0)). Amplitudes of the displacements are reduced to ∼0.1 m about 80 km from the fault. The InSAR interferograms show a total of ∼0.7 m range change with Lband SAR data on either side of the fault, although missing near-field data on the hanging-wall side resulted in incomplete coverage of the total range change there. The geometry of the Wenchuan earthquake rupture on the BCF and PGF is complex. Field observations suggest that the faults have varying dip angles, with relatively shallow dip angles along the southwestern section of

Figure 2 | **InSAR and GPS data fittings. a**, InSAR range-change data. The white curves depict traces of fault surface breaks, and the red dots show surface points of fault-model patches. Red arrows and green bars are GPS-observed coseismic offsets for the horizontal and vertical components. Black arrows are model-predicted coseismic offsets, horizontal or vertical. **b**, Model-predicted range changes for PALSAR and ASAR measurements. **c**, GPS and InSAR data postfit residuals. Red arrows and black columns are for the horizontal and vertical components of GPS displacements, whose uncertainties are represented as ellipses and lines at arrow and bar tips at 95% confidence.

the rupture and near vertical towards the northeastern^{[3](#page-7-2)}. However, dip angles measured at the surface offsets are often highly uncertain and may not reflect the dip angles at depth^{[3](#page-7-2)}. Precisely located aftershock hypocenters using the double-differencing method do not clearly illuminate the subsurface rupture geometry either^{[21](#page-7-16)}. We therefore simultaneously invert for the first-order fault geometry and the slip distribution on the fault plane in our geodetic inversion.

Fault geometry and slip distribution modelling

Our inversion finds that the BCF dips to the northwest at a moderate angle of ∼43◦ at the southwest end, and the fault plane gradually becomes steeper northeastward along strike, reaching ∼50◦ at Nanba [\(Fig.](#page-4-0) [3a](#page-4-0)). The dip angle jumps to ∼56◦ across the Nanba step-over, and increases progressively to near vertical at the northeast end of the rupture. The PGF dips shallowly at ∼28◦ , suggesting a common root shared with the Yingxiu–Beichuan segment of the BCF at a depth of ∼18 km, a result consistent with balanced geologic cross-sections across the southern BCF (ref. [22\)](#page-7-17).

The slip distribution on the BCF shows three high-slip concentrations [\(Fig.](#page-4-0) [3b](#page-4-0)–d). The first one is from Yingxiu to Xiaoyudong (subsegment B10 in [Fig.](#page-4-0) [3b](#page-4-0)) at 0–10 km depth. Its thrust slip averages ∼5 m, and peaks at the surface at 5.8 m. The dextral slip is also concentrated near the surface, with a maximum of about 2.5 m. A second, smaller high-slip area at 0–7 km depth near Beichuan (subsegment B6 in [Fig.](#page-4-0) [3b](#page-4-0)) has comparable peak slip values, with 5.2 m and 4.8 m of thrust and dextral slip, respectively. In addition to the two prominent high-slip areas, a minor peak is located near Nanba (subsegment B4 in [Fig.](#page-4-0) [3b](#page-4-0)), where the dextral and reverse slips at the surface reach local maxima of 3.0 m and 3.2 m, respectively.

The three areas of high-slip concentration are located near the intersections of fault segments. The slip maxima close to Yingxiu and Beichuan are near fault bifurcations and conjugates rupture junctions [\(Fig.](#page-2-0) [1\)](#page-2-0), and the high slip close to Nanba spans a fault step-over, across which there is a change of fault dip angle. We therefore hypothesize that the Wenchuan earthquake broke through several high-slip junctions that connect major fault segments in a cascade rupture. These connecting structures may represent barriers that rarely fail, and would fail only when high stress has accumulated after multiple rounds of smaller events broke the adjoining individual segments. Such a cascade-rupture scenario helps explain why Yingxiu, Beichuan and Nanba experienced the highest shaking intensity of XI

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Figure 3 | **Inversion results. a**, Fault geometry viewed from the southwest, at 45◦ elevation angle. Six dip angles at fault nodal points marked with an asterisk are inverted for in the solution. **b**, Coseismic slip distribution viewed from the northwest, at 45° elevation angle. The PGF is plotted away from its actual location (whose surface trace is marked here and in **c** and **d** as a blue line). Black arrows show the slip vectors on the fault patches, whose amplitudes are denoted by the patch colour. Red lines are the mapped traces of surface breaks^{[3](#page-7-2)}. The brown columns show the density of aftershocks along the fault within 50 km of the surface trace. B1–B11 and G1–G3 are fault subsegments on the BCF and PGF, respectively. **c**,**d**, Reverse and dextral slip amplitudes. The brown columns denote the modelled surface offsets, in comparison with the field observations, shown as blue bars.

and suffered the greatest damage among all the towns located along the fault zone^{[23](#page-7-18)}.

Moderate amounts of slip are detected along the PGF, with about 1.5 m and 0.7 m of average thrust and dextral motions and peak values of ∼2.0 m thrust and 1.5 m dextral slip near its northeast corner close to the surface [\(Fig.](#page-4-0) [3\)](#page-4-0). These results agree with geologically measured average surface offsets^{[3](#page-7-2)}.

Our result also demonstrates moderate amounts of slip on the shallowly dipping fault segment extending northwestward from down-dip of the southwest segment of the BCF (subsegment B10 in [Fig.](#page-4-0) [3b](#page-4-0)). Peak values of thrust motion reach ∼2.0 m close to the hinge connecting to the southwest segment of the BCF. Model inversions without this deep extension produced mechanically implausible results and fit the data significantly worse (see Supplementary Note S1). We conclude that reverse faulting occurred not only on the steep part of the ramp close to the surface but also on a down-dip, near-horizontal detachment fault plane, located up to 30 km away from the surface break.

To estimate the seismic moment release of the fault rupture we integrate the thrust and dextral components along strike and downdip assuming a shear modulus of 3×10^{10} Pa, and obtain the total seismic moment release of 8.03×10^{20} N m, equivalent to an event of *M*^w 7.93. This estimate, however, includes a minor contribution from postseismic deformation, because the postearthquake GPS and InSAR measurements were observed with some delays (from days to weeks). Assuming that coseismic and postseismic slips were in the upper and mid-crust respectively and separated at the depth of 20 km (suggested by the lower bound of aftershock depth range^{[21](#page-7-16)}), we determine the coseismic moment release above this depth as 7.30×10^{20} N m, equivalent to an event of $M_{\rm w}$ 7.91. Ongoing analysis of continuous GPS measurements during the early postseismic period^{[24](#page-7-19)} supports this first-order correction (see Supplementary Note S2).

The surface slip distribution of our model agrees qualitatively with the dextral [\(Fig.](#page-4-0) [3d](#page-4-0)) and vertical [\(Fig.](#page-4-0) [3c](#page-4-0)) components of field measurements. In particular, both the locations and values

Figure 4 | **Secular block-motion model.** GPS velocities are referenced to the Sichuan Basin (that is, also the south China block). Error ellipses represent 70% confidence. Coloured regions denote block domains, within which the GPS site velocities are used to define the block motions. Red lines are the surface breaks of the Wenchuan earthquake^{[6](#page-7-4)}. Regional faults (grey lines) are modified from ref. [28.](#page-7-20)

of the peaks of vertical motions match the surface rupture offsets measured by field geologists^{[3](#page-7-2)}. Our slip distribution also agrees qualitatively with those derived using teleseismic data^{[14](#page-7-10)[,25](#page-7-21)}, with twin peaks of slip near Yingxiu and Beichuan. Solutions of Ji and Hayes^{[14](#page-7-10)}, Wang et al.^{[25](#page-7-21)}, and Zhang et al.^{[26](#page-7-22)} yielded larger maximum slip, ∼9 m, ∼12 m, and ∼7 m respectively, than ours of 5–6 m, but lie at ∼10–20 km depth. The difference may be due to stronger smoothing used in our model and limited depth resolution in the teleseismic studies. A recent slip-distribution model constrained using ALOS InSAR data^{[27](#page-7-23)}, however, offered similar peak-slip locations to ours, although further details of the slip distributions are different owing to differences in data, fault geometry and smoothing constraints.

The two peaks of fault slip on subsegments B6 and B10 coincide with the locations of dense aftershock populations, suggesting strong local stress concentrations and slip on nearby faults triggered by the large coseismic slip [\(Fig.](#page-4-0) [3b](#page-4-0)). High aftershock concentrations on subsegments B2 and B3 in [Fig.](#page-4-0) [3b](#page-4-0) between Nanba and Qingchuan coincide with moderate amounts of broadly distributed slip from the surface down to ∼20 km depth. The aftershock density is considerably lower along the fault segment between Beichuan and Nanba (subsegment B5 and south part of subsegment B4) than along the neighbouring segments to the northeast and southwest, and the fault slip seems concentrated at shallow depths of less than 8 km, leaving a slip gap on the deeper part of the fault.

Regional block motion and earthquake recurrence interval

What causes the change of faulting mechanism from predominantly thrust in the southwest to dextral in the northeast? To examine how strain is partitioned in the region we devise a block-motion model constrained using regional pre-earthquake GPS velocities [\(Fig.](#page-5-0) [4\)](#page-5-0). Our result suggests that, for the region between the East Kunlun fault to the north and the Xianshuihe fault to the south, deformation is partitioned into 4.4 ± 0.8 mm yr⁻¹ dextral slip across the Longriba fault, 1.4 ± 0.6 mm yr⁻¹ convergence and 1.7 ± 0.6 mm yr⁻¹ dextral slip across the central section of the Longmen Shan fault and 1.0 ± 0.8 mm yr[−]¹ convergence across the Minjiang–Huya fault system. Deformation across the northeast section of the Longmen Shan fault is rather minor, mainly in the form of dextral slip $(0.8 \pm 0.6 \text{ mm yr}^{-1})$ instead of normal convergence (0.3 ± 0.6 mm yr[−]¹). Our kinematic model is consistent with the regional topography, which shows sharp contrasts across the southwest-central Longmen Shan fault zone and the Minjiang–Huya fault system, whereas a gentler gradient is found across the northeast section of the Longmen Shan^{[2](#page-7-1)} [\(Fig.](#page-2-0) [1\)](#page-2-0). More discussions about the regional tectonics and implications of our results can be found in Supplementary Note S3.

We use our results of coseismic slip and secular deformation rates to estimate earthquake recurrence intervals for individual segments of the Longmen Shan fault. We divide the BCF and PGF into 11 and three subsegments, respectively, as shown in [Fig.](#page-4-0) [3b](#page-4-0). The faults are assumed to be listric at depth, such that the fault slips interseismically across a flat fault plane at its down-dip continuation, at a rate close to the GPS-measured far-field relative motion. The coseismic slip at the surface, therefore, would be equivalent to the slip deficit accumulated interseismically at the down-dip slip rate. We first take averages within each subsegment of the strike-slip and dip-slip components of coseismic slip over the top five rows of patches, representing the seismogenic part of the crust. We then use the two slip components to obtain the amplitude of the mean coseismic slip within each subsegment.

For each fault subsegment the earthquake recurrence interval *T* can be estimated as $T = S/V$, where *S* is the mean coseismic slip on the fault subsegment and *V* is the secular fault slip (or slip deficit) rate. We use our coseismic slip and both the interseismic block model results and geologic slip rates of individual faults 10 to estimate earthquake recurrence intervals on individual fault subsegments. Results are listed in [Table](#page-6-0) [1.](#page-6-0) The GPS-derived fault

Table 1 | **Earthquake recurrence intervals of fault subsegments.**

slip rates tend to be greater than geological estimates, because GPS results account for contributions from all of the faults in the region, whereas geological estimates account for contributions only from measured individual faults. Therefore, using GPS estimated fault slip rates tends to produce smaller estimates of recurrence interval than using geological estimates. Nevertheless our analysis yields >1,000 year recurrence intervals for all the fault segments. They are 2.3–4.0 \times 10³ years for the northeast section of the BCF (subsegments B1–B5) and $1.4-4.4 \times 10^3$ years for the central section of the BCF (segments B6–B11), regardless of whether the characteristic events are assumed to break the BCF only or both the BCF and PGF. The recurrence intervals on the PGF could be as large as 10^4 years. The numbers are 4.0×10^3 years and 4.4×10^3 years for the Beichuan (B6) and Yingxiu (B10) subsegments if the geological slip rate of the BCF is adopted for the estimates, suggesting the longest recurrence intervals for the two asperity subsegments on the BCF.

In conclusion, we find that the Wenchuan earthquake consecutively ruptured multiple fault segments along the BCF, as well as the subparallel PGF. Fault slip on the BCF was predominantly reverse faulting on shallowly dipping fault segments in the southwest, and changed progressively to predominantly dextral faulting on steeper fault segments as the rupture propagated northeastward. This change in geometry and slip is consistent with a southwest-to-northeast transition from more rapid and mostly convergent to slower and nearly transform motion along the Longmen Shan deduced from a block model of pre-earthquake GPS velocities. The quake produced peak slips near junctures of fault segments, suggesting that these fault junctions represent barriers that rarely fail, recurring as parts of major cascade ruptures about every 4×10^3 years. The three major high-slip junctions are near Yingxiu, Beichuan and Nanba, which suffered the highest structural damage and fatality rates among all the towns located along the fault rupture zone.

Methods

GPS and InSAR data and their processing. The GPS data are obtained by the Working Group of the Crustal Motion Observation Network of China Project^{[29](#page-7-24)} (with major contributions from members of our group), using data collected before and after the quake in the vicinity of the seismic region. The data are processed using the GAMIT/GLOBK (ref. [30\)](#page-7-25) and QOCA (ref. [31\)](#page-7-26)

software. Further details about the determination of coseismic offsets and consideration of postseismic contributions to the measurements are detailed in Supplementary Notes S4 and S2.

Two kinds of SAR data are used to retrieve the coseismic signals of the Wenchuan earthquake, namely Envisat ASAR data in the C-band (5.6 cm wavelength) from ESA and ALOS PALSAR data in the L-band (23.6 cm wavelength) from JAXA. PALSAR data from eight paths (470–477) and eight frames (580–650) are processed, covering a region of ∼540 km wide from west to east and ∼525 km long from south to north, enclosing the entire fault rupture zone [\(Fig.](#page-2-0) [1,](#page-2-0) Supplementary Table S1). The epochs of postseismic PALSAR observations are within 1-7 weeks of the quake (see Supplementary Table S1), and the postseismic deformation accumulated within this time period is found to be small (a few per cent compared with the coseismic signals, see Supplementary Note S2). Details about the data processing and subsampling procedures can be found in Supplementary Note S4, and Supplementary Note S5 provides further information on how the relative weights of the GPS and InSAR data are considered in the model inversions.

Inversion of fault-rupture model. To construct the fault-rupture model we let all fault segments extend to the Earth's surface, including sections where no surface slip was observed. The surface traces of the faults are based on amplitude pixel offsets of SAR image pairs, with additional *a priori* information on fault geometry coming from distribution of aftershocks as described in Supplementary Note S6. Three sections of the fault rupture are defined in the model [\(Fig.](#page-4-0) [3\)](#page-4-0): the main fault rupture on BCF, the secondary rupture on PGF, and a blind thrust branching westward from the down-dip end of the southwest segment of BCF. See Supplementary Method S1 for fault meshing and smoothing. We use a Newtonian nonlinear inversion procedure to solve for the fault geometry and slip distribution on faults. The fits of the coseismic slip model to the InSAR and GPS data are shown in [Fig.](#page-3-0) [2.](#page-3-0) Supplementary Note S7 and Tables S2 and S3 provide further details on the fault slip model, the nonlinear inversion method and results.

Block-motion model. Our interseismic block-motion model is derived from synthesizing four epochs of campaign-mode measurements of the CMONOC project 1999–2007 (refs [32,](#page-7-27) [33\)](#page-7-28). (Our results should be more precise than estimates of previous studies, because adding the 2007 epoch extends the time span of the CMONOC campaign data from 5 to 8 years compared with our previously published dataset in ref. [34\)](#page-7-29). Assuming rigid blocks for the Sichuan Basin, southwest Longmen Shan, northeast Longmen Shan, Aba and Litang blocks, we estimate the angular velocity of each block with respect to the Sichuan Basin, which seems to be stable with respect to the larger South China microplate^{[12](#page-7-8)}. Using the block-rotation parameters we determine the relative displacement rates across the block boundaries, which provides geodetic fault slip-rate estimates and their uncertainties, taking into account all the variance/covariance among different station velocity components [\(Fig.](#page-5-0) [4\)](#page-5-0).

Derivation of earthquake recurrence intervals on faults. For those BCF and PGF subsegments (B8–B10 and G1–G3) that are sub-parallel and ruptured together during this quake, quantification of the characteristic event's slip and the fault

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secular slip rate on the segment becomes less clear. If the Wenchuan earthquake is considered 'characteristic', that is, the largest events would always produce simultaneous rupture on both faults, the recurrence interval on a pair of the fault segments can then be estimated using a sum of the mean slip (weighted over the rupture areas) on the faults and the secular block motion rate relevant to the fault patch. If, however, the Wenchuan earthquake is only a rare occasion, and most of the time rupture would occur on individual faults alone, the recurrence intervals on these fault segments will then have to be estimated separately using their coseismic slips (assuming slips on both faults are 'characteristic') and secular slip rates of individual faults. Owing to limited spatial coverage of the regional GPS network, our block-motion model derived using GPS data does not have the details to differentiate individual fault slip rates from their aggregated rate. We instead use geologically estimated fault slip rates^{[10](#page-7-6)} to make the estimation. The corresponding uncertainties of the earthquake recurrence interval estimations are discussed in Supplementary Note S8.

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Author contributions

Z.-K.S., R.B., Y.Z., P.Z., and J.S. wrote the paper. J.S. and M.W. processed InSAR and GPS data. Y.W. and Z.-K.S. carried out modelling and inversion. P.Z., W.G., H.L., and Q.W. organized GPS field surveys for data collection.

Additional information

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Note 1. Alternative fault model

Supplementary Information

In a preliminary model we allowed for only a constant-dip BCF fault plane along the southeast segment. The inversion result yielded a fault with a much shallower $(\leq 20^{\circ})$ dip angle and significant slip on a fault stretching more than 45 km down dip. This model does not seem to be realistic physically, and data fitting was much worse than the current model (rejected by F-test at high confidence level).

We still lack a complete structural model from independent data to provide a more detailed 3D fault rupture geometry. However, we hope that more detailed structural models using data and approaches as described for a single cross-section by Hubbard and Shaw²² will ultimately allow for a more accurate characterization of the geometry.

Note 2. Postseismic deformation and its effect on coseismic displacement estimation

The post-earthquake GPS and SAR data used in this study were measured 1-4 and 1-7 weeks after the quake respectively (postseismic InSAR and GPS epochs are listed in Supplementary Tables 1 and 3, respectively), and postseismic deformation occurred prior to the GPS or InSAR measurements are included in our coseismic displacement estimates. Here we use regional continuous GPS measurements to assess possible effects of postseismic displacements on the estimates of coseismic displacements²⁴. Fig. S1 shows the coseismic and postseismic displacement vectors, and data time series of three sites located in the vicinity of the fault rupture. Station PIXI is located about 25 km away from the maximum rupture on the BCF, and has continuous data recording through the year of 2008, with only a few hours of data missing right after the earthquake (due to power failure). The detrended position time series of the site for a 9-month time period spanning the quake, shows a large coseismic offset $(\sim 0.7 \text{ m})$, but merely 0-6 mm of poseismic displacements within 5 months after the event (lower left panel, Fig. S1). Following the quake more continuous GPS stations were installed in the vicinity of the fault rupture, whose data help further quantify the temporal behavior of the postseismic deformation²⁴. The postseismic displacement time series of a GPS site is modeled using a logarithmic function: $D(t) = D_0 Log(1+t/T)$, where D_0 is the amplitude of the postseismic displacement vector, and T is the logarithmic relaxation time. Using the first six months of data we have estimated a common relaxation time of 8 days (between 4 and 15 days at 95% confidence level) for all the sites²⁴. Fig. S1 of lower right panel shows the station position time series of two sites H035 and NR09. The horizontal postseismic displacement amplitudes (D_0) for H035 and NR09 are 9.0 mm and 19.1 mm, respectively. The H035 postseismic displacements accumulated 3 and 7 weeks after the quake would therefore be about 12 mm and 18 mm, respectively (0.49% and 0.74% of the coseismic displacement amplitude). The same estimates for NR09 are 25 mm and 38 mm, respectively (3.0% and 4.5% of the coseismic displacement amplitude). These estimates are obtained on condition that a logarithmic relaxation function is adequate to describe the temporal behavior of postseismic deformation. Substantial evidence supports this model, including continuous GPS time series recorded during the entire postseismic period at permanent sites located more distant from the coseismic rupture of the Wenchuan quake than the two sites mentioned above²⁴. Fig. S1 also reveals both coseismic and postseismic displacement vectors at more sites, such as H010, H032, SD07, CHDU, MYAN, and RENS, etc.,

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whose coseismic/postseismic amplude ratios are similar to that of H035 and NR09. Based on the preliminary analysis of the postseismic data we conclude that the early postseismic deformation field should be at least an order of magnitude less than the coseismic slip, and therefore does not significantly affect our estimate of fault slip distribution.

Note 3. Regional tectonics

The Longmen Shan fault system overprinted a Mesozoic orogenic belt during the Late Cenozoic^{2,4} as the result of the Indo-Asia collision, when the Tibetan plateau was extruded eastward^{S1,S2}, thrusting crustal material of the Songpan-Ganzi block onto a deeply rooted and mechanically strong Sichuan basin. Previous geologic studies have found ample evidence of active reverse and dextral faulting for the central sections of the BCF and PGF, but little such evidence has been found for the northeast sections of the faults north of Beichuan^{2,8,9}. Pre-earthquake geodetic studies suggest that deformation in the region between the Longmen Shan and Xianshuihe faults is partitioned. The Longriba fault located \sim 150 km northwest of and parallel to the Longmen Shan fault (Fig. 1) has \sim 4-6 mm/yr dextral motion, but such a shearing motion diminishes northeastward toward the eastern end of the East Kunlun fault^{12,13,S2}. The sinistral motion on the East Kunlun fault, on the other hand, tapers down to ≤ 2 mm/yr toward its eastern end S2 , suggesting that most of the relative motion between the eastern Tibetan plateau and Sichuan basin is accommodated along the East Kunlun and Longriba faults. The remaining part has to be absorbed by tectonic structures located between the two domains. Our derived convergence rate across the central Longmen Shan fault $(1.4\pm 0.6 \text{ mm/yr})$ is consistent with Burchfiel et al.'s² estimate of 1 ± 1 mm/yr, derived using an earlier version of the GPS dataset than we use here. Our estimates of 1.4 ± 0.6 mm/yr convergence and 1.7 ± 0.6 mm/yr dextral slip across the central Longmen Shan fault system, at the lower bound, also agree with geological estimates of 0.5-0.8 mm/yr convergence and \sim 1.2 mm/yr dextral slip across both the central BCF and $PGF¹⁰$. Considering that other faults such as the WMF located west of the BCF and miscellaneous thrust faults located along the northwestern rim of the Sichuan Basin (e.g. the Longquan and Xiongpo faults⁶) may also make minor contributions to the transpressional motion across the region, the GPS derived regional deformation rates of the past decade are quite consistent with the geological fault slip rates. The lower slip rates of our estimate across the northeastern part of the Longmen Shan $(0.8\pm0.6 \text{ mm/yr} \text{ dextral and } 0.3\pm0.6 \text{ mm/yr} \text{ shortening})$ are consistent with geological result showing no significant Holocene faulting activities across the faults in the region⁸. Our result is also supported by seismological and tectonic studies on the Minjiang-Huya fault system showing active reverse faulting^{S5, S6}. These results explain the mechanism change of coseismic slip, from predominantly thrust at the southwest end to pure dextral at the northeast end of the rupture.

Note 4. GPS and InSAR data processing

Most of the GPS stations had years of preseismic occupation history with the latest survey made less than a year prior to the quake, thus secular deformation before the quake could be readily estimated and separated from the coseismic displacements. The postseismic surveys were conducted 1-7 weeks after the quake. Components of immediate postseismic motions in the coseismic displacement estimates are minor, only a few percent for most of the near and intermediate sites, based on our assessment of postseismic deformation recorded by continuous

GPS sites in the region²⁴ (see the Supplementary Note 2 for details). 158 horizontal and 46 vertical data points are used (see refs. [29] and [12] for details about the data and processing procedure, and Supplementary Table 3 for data). The selected sites are within 300 km distance from the rupture.

The SAR data are processed using the ROI_PAC software developed at Caltech/JPL (Rosen et. al, 2004), with an ALOS extension coded by Sandwell et al.^{S7} The 3-arc-second SRTM data^{S8} are interpolated to a 1-arc-second grid for topography phase removal. To process the ALOS and Envisat data we first compute the interferograms and remove the topographic signal. We then geocode the wrapped phase into a geographic coordinate system, and apply a multi-look operation (6-look or 2-look for ALOS or ASAR data respectively to produce ~170 m ground pixel size) before phase unwrapping. This procedure boosts the signal-to-noise ratio of InSAR observations, makes the fringes of the interferograms clearer, and makes phase unwrapping more reliable, especially on the hanging wall side. In the next step we use the minimum cost flow algorithm (MCF) unwrapping module in the Gamma software to unwrap each of the interferograms, which minimizes the phase jumping errors and simultaneously maximizes the availability of InSAR phases^{S9}. The unwrapped phase is continuous except at places across the fault rupture. After phase unwrapping, we correct for satellite orbit errors and topography correlated atmospheric effects. This is done by estimating a linear orbit ramp and the DEM-related phase S10 on the DEM-flattened interferograms using the least squares method, which minimizes the range changes in the far field where no significant deformation is expected. We then remove the DEM-related phase from the data. We find that only path 472 of the ALOS data was disturbed significantly by the effect of atmospheric vertical stratification (DEM-related).

We do not remove the orbit ramp from the data at this stage because its estimate based on the assumption of minimal far field deformation may not be reliable. The far field signals for the ALOS L-band data could be seriously contaminated by ionosphere disturbances, which, according to Sandwell et al.^{S7}, might be \sim 16.5 times as large as for the C-band data according to their fequency difference. It is better to do the orbit-ramp correction using GPS data than just assuming flat signals in the far field becuase the unclear far field signal may be far from zero as we expect. The distributed locations of the GPS observation points throughout the interferograms also makes the calibrations more robust. For each path or track we assume a linear orbit ramp, and minimize in a least squares sense the differences between the GPS derived coseismic displacements in the SAR viewing directions and the corresponding quad-tree resampled InSAR points^{S11}.

After removing the orbit ramp the postfit residuals are less than 3 cm for most of the ALOS PALSAR data and less than 2 cm for most of the Envisat ASAR data. The phase data of paths 472~474 are decorrelated across the fault breaks, and their north and south panels are unwrapped separately. The phase jumps across the fault surface breaks for these three interferograms are also estimated and corrected in the GPS calibration. The constant phase shifts of all the paths and the phase jumps across the fault breaks of paths 472-474 are estimated further in the joint GPS and InSAR dislocation inversion later on. As expected, all of these constant shifts are smaller than 3 cm except for the one of the south part of path 472, which is up to 13.6 cm**.** This is likely because only one GPS data point was available for making the orbit ramp correction of this data panel, and the result might be subject to large errors. We also

identify regions showing strong long-wavelength, non-earthquake deformation signals, such as the southern parts of paths 471 and 472 and the northern part of path 473. Such problematic data are excluded from the model inversion (Fig. S2).

We apply a quad-tree decomposition algorithm to decimate the InSAR data ^{S11}. We first expand the InSAR LOS images by padding zeros to empty areas, making the image dimensions to be a power of 2. We then split the expanded image up to four equal quadrants and compute the variance of each quadrant. If the variance of a quadrant is larger than a presumed threshold, the quadrant will be split up to four smaller quadrants. If the variance of a quadrant is lower than the threshold, we compute the mean LOS phase value of the quadrant as its representative deformation measurement. The sub-sampling procedure is done iteratively until convergence. The threshold is set according to the noise level of the InSAR data. It is above the correlation noise level, but low enough so that the deformation gradients are kept as complete as possible. Considering the long strip of ALOS data, we choose three different thresholds for different regions of the data: 2 cm, 2-3 cm, and >3 cm for the near, intermediate, and far fields, respectively. For the ASAR data, the threshold is set to be 1 cm, consistent with its very low noise level.

In the sub-sampling process, we also compute the LOS unit vector of every InSAR point so that the influence of varying view angles can be minimized, especially in the common parts of neighboring tracks/paths.

Note 5. Reweighting of GPS and InSAR data

We have reweighted the GPS and InSAR data as follow. We down-weight the GPS data by adding a factor of $D^{\frac{1}{2}}$ to their original uncertainties, where D is the displacement amplitude in millimeter. Such a treatment is based on the consideration that the near-field GPS data are sensitive to abrupt spatial variations of fault slip and may not be compatible with the smoothing constraint imposed on the fault slip model.

We adopt a conservative strategy dealing with data errors, not accounting for correlation of the InSAR and GPS data in our inversion. This simple approach is widely used in InSAR studies. There have also been studies considering the correlated errors in modeling^{S12,S13}, but the approaches have not been independently verified, especially using independent observations. Our group developed a 2D full covariance error model to describe the atmospheric delay of radar signals, applied that to the 2008 Nima, Tibet earthquake, and found that it did not have much an impact to our solution^{S14}. Furthermore, the current studies on InSAR error correlation have been with C-Band data only, which do not have the kind of long-wavelength disturbance like the ALOS data do. And, the construction of variance/covariance matrix requires that the far field InSAR data be of second order stationary with a zero mean, a condition which could not be met here because of the long-wavelength disturbance in the ALOS data. We therefore choose to use a diagonal error matrix for both the InSAR and GPS data. The uncertainties of the ALOS and ASAR data are set to be 50 mm and 20 mm respectively. Both uncertainties are assigned higher than their nominal uncertainties by a factor of about two, to compensate for neglecting the spatial correlations of the InSAR data errors in data error propagation.

It is still subject to discussion how much weighting relative to GPS data the InSAR data should be assigned. We attempt a range of the InSAR down-weighting factors from 1.5 to 3.0 in test runs. The results do show some changes in solution, such as slight reduction of the

largest slip when the GPS data are weighted relatively less; but the first order features, such as the locations and sizes of the peaks and lows, remain unchanged.

Note 6. Identification of fault surface breaks and geometry

We use the amplitude offset data of SAR pairs to locate fault surface breaks, the approach is similar to the one used by Peltzer et al. S^{10} The offset-tracking technique of the Gamma software with 64 x 64 windows and 8 x 16 steps on the Single Look Complex data is applied to retrieve the range and azimuth offset fields (Figs. S3 a $\&$ b). The results of the offset-tracking processing provide strong constraints on the fault locations of the Wenchuan earthquake. Both the azimuth and range offset data sets are used for fault identification. The former is important for the PGF trace identification, and the latter is good for the BCF rupture identification (Fig. S3). Because the datasets themselves still have multiple wavelength features after removing orbital tilts from the offset field, especially in the azimuth offset data, we do not use these data for modeling. We suspect that the multiple wavelength features were caused by ionosphere disturbance, but further investigation is needed to test this hypothesis.

Concentration of aftershock locations helps identify the surface projections of the faults at the northeast and southwest ends, where the rupture may not have broken to the surface. The surface traces are further smoothed to shape the top boundaries of our fault rupture model. The fault dip angle is assumed constant down-dip, but varies linearly along strike for the entire fault except at Nanba $(\sim 104.8^{\circ}E, 32.2^{\circ}N)$. Aftershock locations suggest a right-stepping offset at depth across this location, with a northwest dipping fault plane to the southwest of the fault step and a near vertical geometry to the northeast²¹. We therefore allow a dip angle change across this step-over, separating the fault plane of the BCF into two segments. A uniform dip angle is assumed for the PGF section of the fault plane and treated as unknown in the inversion. Six dip angles at fault nodal points are inverted for in the solution, the other dip angles are either interpolated or tied to the neighbor (for the southwestern end point, Fig. 3a).

Note 7. Meshing and smoothing of fault model

All the fault sections are meshed with small rectangular tiles of \sim 4 \times 4 km in size. The BCF section of the fault plane is assumed to have 7 rows of patches with 28 km in total width (Fig. 3). A flat fault segment is assumed to branch out from the downdip end of the southwest segment of the BCF (Fig. 3a), and is composed of 7×13 patches. Inclusion of the segment is required by the data (see Note 1). The PGF section of the fault plane is assumed to have 5 rows of patches, and spans 20 km in total down-dip width. Smoothing constraints are imposed for all the neighboring patches, on both the along-strike and down-dip components, with a finite uncertainty of 100 mm assumed for the smoothing conditions. The only exception is at Nanba between the first and second fault segments of the BCF counting from the northeast, where no smoothing is imposed on the neighboring slip components and an abrupt change of the fault dip angle is allowed (Fig. 3). The uncertainty value is chosen by balancing a trade-off curve between the postfit residual χ^2 and the number of parameters resolved in the solution (see ref. [S₁₆] for details of the procedure).

Note 8. Uncertainties in earthquake recurrence interval estimations

The earthquake recurrence intervals across fault segments are derived from estimates of

mean fault slip of a characteristic event and interseismic fault slip (or deficit) rates. These estimates are subject to multiple sources of errors, which need to be accounted for to better understand the reliability of these estimates. For derivations of the mean coseismic fault slip across fault segments, we take a mean slip of the top five rows, equivalent to 20 km of fault width. If the downdip width of 20 km does not match the bottom of the seismogenic layer, the mean coseismic slip estimate can be off. We run a test calculating the mean fault slip rates of the top four, five, and six rows of the fault patches (equivalent to 16 km, 20 km, and 24 km of fault width). Our result shows that among the 14 fault segments calculated, 11 have variations of their fault slip estimates of less than 10%, and 3 have variations greater than 10% but less than 20%, respectively. Errors on the fault dip angle estimates have no direct effect on our mean slip estimate, since we assume a listric fault whose balance between the interseismic moment accumulation (proportional to interseismic slip rate) and coseismic moment release (proportional to mean fault slip) does not depend on the dip angle. Variation of degree of smoothing of fault slip would change the mean fault slip estimate a bit, but only by a few percent when the a priori smoothing uncertainty changes between 70 mm and 200 mm.

Estimations on the interseismic fault slip rates, however, suffer from greater uncertainties. The secular shortening rate is 1.4±0.6 mm/yr for the southwest segment and the secular dextral slip rate is 0.8 ± 0.6 mm/yr for the northeast segment of the Longmen Shan fault, respectively, making the errors corresponded to \sim 43% and \sim 75% of the signals. The geological estimate of the fault slip rate on the BCF is 0.3-0.6 mm/yr; that is, the error corresponds to \sim 33% of the signal. Another relatively large error source is the uncertainty of the characteristic events for the fault segments: whether they are independent or joint ruptures on the BCF and PGF. Weighing all these factors, we take only two error sources into consideration in our estimates of earthquake recurrence intervals: uncertainties of the fault slip rates and the characteristic rupture events, since all the other errors are of higher order and would not have much impacts on our final estimates of the recurrence intervals.

Method 1. Fault slip model and Newtonian nonlinear inversion

The slips on individual fault patches are linked to the GPS and InSAR measurements on the Earth's surface using the Okada dislocation code^{S17} that allows for the calculation of displacements in a uniform elastic half-space, and the partial derivatives for the nonlinear parameters of six dip angles are derived numerically. We start the model assuming a uniform dip of 50° to the northwest for all the BCF and PGF segments; after about 30 iteration steps the solution converges.

We have 362 GPS and 9110 InSAR data entries in the inversion. The total number of linear model parameters is 1364, which includes 12 InSAR offset terms (1 or 2 terms for each scene depending on whether range-change continuity is preserved across the fault) in addition to the slip components on 676 fault patches. There are another six nonlinear parameters for the dip angles, which are inverted for together with the linear parameters.

We use a Newtonian nonlinear inversion procedure to solve for the coseismic slip distribution, constrained using the GPS and InSAR data. The procedure is as follows.

Let the problem be:

 $\mathbf{v} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{x} + \mathbf{e}$,

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where **y** is an $n \times 1$ array composed of the GPS and InSAR data, *n* is the total number of data points. The GPS data are the east, north, and up components of coseismic displacements, and the InSAR data are the coseismic line of sight changes. \bf{x} is an array of $m_l \times 1$, composed of two parts; the first part involves the along strike and up-dip components of coseismic slip on fault patches, and the second part has the constants of SAR satellite orbit ramp and the across-fault jumps for paths 472, 473, and 474. **A** is an $n \times m_l$ array, linking the unknowns of fault slip and the interferogram constants linearly to the observations. $\mathbf{A} = \mathbf{A}(\mathbf{z})$, $\mathbf{z} = (z_1, z_2, \Lambda, z_m)$ are the

nonlinear parameters of fault dip angles. $m_n = 6$ for our model. **e** is an $n \times 1$ array for data errors. $\mathbf{e} = N(0, C_d)$, C_d is the variance/covariance matrix of the errors.

We impose a first-order smoothing constraint to the fault slip components, in the form of

$$
0 = \mathbf{G}x + \mathbf{h},
$$

where **G** is a $p \times m_l$ array for imposing p constraints to the solution. For each pair of adjacent fault tiles (in both along strike and up-dip directions), the entries are 1 and -1 for the corresponding pair of slip components, and 0 for the rest of the components. **h** is a $p\times1$ array of a priori errors. $h = N(0, C_a)$, C_a is the variance/covariance matrix of the a priori errors, composed of non-zero diagonal terms only.

The joint equations for data and a priori constraints are:

$$
\begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{y} \\ \mathbf{0} \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{A} \\ \mathbf{G} \end{bmatrix} \mathbf{x} + \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{e} \\ \mathbf{h} \end{bmatrix}
$$

In the first step we assume a set of nonlinear parameters \mathbf{z}_0 , then $\mathbf{y} = \mathbf{A}(z_0)\mathbf{x} + \mathbf{e}$, a least

squares solution yields: $\mathbf{x}_0 = (\mathbf{A}^T \mathbf{C}_d^{-1} \mathbf{A} + \mathbf{G}^T \mathbf{C}_a^{-1} \mathbf{G})^{-1} \mathbf{A}^T \mathbf{C}_d^{-1} \mathbf{y}$ **d** $\mathbf{1} \cap \Gamma^{\perp} \wedge \mathbf{1}$ **a** 1_A **T d T** $\mathbf{0} = (\mathbf{A}^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_{\mathbf{d}}^{-1} \mathbf{A} + \mathbf{G}^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_{\mathbf{a}}^{-1} \mathbf{G})^{-1} \mathbf{A}^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_{\mathbf{d}}^{-1}$

The first round postfit residuals are:

$$
\begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{d} \mathbf{y}_1 \\ \mathbf{d} \mathbf{b}_1 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{y} \\ \mathbf{0} \end{bmatrix} - \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{A}(\mathbf{z}_0) \\ \mathbf{G} \end{bmatrix} \mathbf{x}_0
$$

Taking the first order perturbation of the observables:

$$
dy = A dx + \frac{dA}{dz} x dz + e
$$

Or: $dy = \begin{bmatrix} A & B \end{bmatrix} \frac{dA}{dz}$ ⎦ $\left|\frac{dx}{dx}\right|$ $=[A \quad B] \frac{dx}{dz}$ $dy = \begin{bmatrix} A & B \end{bmatrix}$, where $B = \frac{dx}{y}$ **dz x**, which are the numerically derived partial

derivatives with respect to the fault dip angles.

Let the postfit residuals link with parameter increments:

$$
\begin{bmatrix} dy_1 \\ db_1 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} A(z_0) & B(z_0, x_0) \\ G & 0 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} dx \\ dz \end{bmatrix} + \begin{bmatrix} e \\ h \end{bmatrix}
$$

Solve above equations by least squares to obtain dx_1 and dz_1 :

$$
\begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{d} \mathbf{x}_1 \\ \mathbf{d} \mathbf{z}_1 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} (\mathbf{A} \ \mathbf{B})^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_d^{-1} (\mathbf{A} \ \mathbf{B}) + \mathbf{G}^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_a^{-1} \mathbf{G} \end{bmatrix}^{-1} (\mathbf{A} \ \mathbf{B})^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_d^{-1} \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{d} \mathbf{y}_1 \\ \mathbf{d} \mathbf{b}_1 \end{bmatrix}
$$

Let $\mathbf{z}_1 = \mathbf{z}_0 + \mathbf{dz}_1$, $\mathbf{x}_1 = \mathbf{x}_0 + \mathbf{dx}_1$, the second round postfit residuals are:

$$
\begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{dy}_2 \\ \mathbf{db}_2 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{y} \\ \mathbf{0} \end{bmatrix} - \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{A}(\mathbf{z}_1) \\ \mathbf{G} \end{bmatrix} \mathbf{x}_1
$$

Then we solve

$$
\begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{d} \mathbf{y}_2 \\ \mathbf{d} \mathbf{b}_2 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{A}(\mathbf{z}_1) & \mathbf{B}(\mathbf{z}_1) \\ \mathbf{G} & \mathbf{0} \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{d} \mathbf{x}_2 \\ \mathbf{d} \mathbf{z}_2 \end{bmatrix} + \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{e} \\ \mathbf{h} \end{bmatrix}
$$

by least squares to obtain dx_2 and dz_2 .

Continue the iteration until the weighted postfit χ^2 reduction becomes trivial. The

postfit χ^2 is defined as:

$$
\chi^2 = dy^T C_d^{-1} dy + db^T C_d^{-1} db
$$

The resolution matrix is s^{18} .

$$
R = (\mathbf{A}^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_{\mathrm{d}}^{-1} \mathbf{A} + \mathbf{G}^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_{\mathrm{a}}^{-1} \mathbf{G})^{-1} \mathbf{A}^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_{\mathrm{d}}^{-1} \mathbf{A}
$$

The sum of the diagonal terms of R is the total number of resolution (i.e. the rank of the resolution matrix) resolved by the data. The reduced postfit χ_d^2 due to data is defined as

$$
\chi_d^2 = \frac{\mathbf{dy}^{\mathrm{T}} \mathbf{C}_\mathbf{d}^{-1} \mathbf{dy}}{n - m_l - m_n}.
$$

The inverted fault slip model is listed in Supplementary Table 2, and the GPS data fitting result is in Supplementary Table 3. Among all the slip parameters only 53.5 degrees of freedom are resolved by data, the rest are constrained by the a priori smoothing constraints (see ref. [S18] for resolution interpretation of the inversion). It means that slip on individual fault patches may not be well resolved and reliable; however, slip patterns over a panel of several patches have much better resolution and reliability.

The model is able to achieve 94% reduction of the GPS and InSAR data variance after model fitting, and the reduced posteriori residual χ^2 is 3.70. Such a result suggests that although there may be some parts of the data not well explained, the overall fit is quite reasonable.

As shown in Fig. 2, our optimal model successfully explains most of the deformation signals. Nevertheless there are still some notable patterns left in the residual interferograms. We may have explanations for some of them. For example, the negative range change of up to 30 cm in the region northeast of the PGF surface rupture suggests that a longer PGF rupture is needed to model the deformation field. The phase discontinuity on the interferograms across this section of the fault is not clear (Fig. S2). Discontinuous traces of fault fissures were witnessed along this section of the PGF, but measured offsets were small $(\sim 10 \text{ cm})^3$. The lack of observations, however, does not preclude the possibility that the PGF may have broken

underneath the surface, causing deformation in the region. The negative range change south of Beichuan may have been the result of a similar cause, as the interferogram in the region shows a moderate phase gradient equivalent to a few centimeters of range change. Some large residuals in the intermediate and far field range from the fault were probably produced by atmospheric disturbances and cannot be modeled in this study, such as the ones located at the southern parts of the images of tracks 471, 472, and 476, and at the northern part of the image of track 473 (Figs. 2 and S2).

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Figure S1. Upper panel: station coseismic (blue arrows) and postseismic (red arrows) displacement vectors (Note the different scale of arrows shown in inset legend). The postseismic displacements are presented as amplitudes of logarithmic functions, equivalent to accumulated displacements at the 14th day after the quake. Lower right panel: horizontal components of postseismic displacement time series for stations H035 and NR09; black triangles are the data, red curves are those predicted by a logarithmic relaxation model with a time constant of 8 days. Red vertical dashed lines mark the epoch of earthquake occurrence. Lower left panel: horizontal components of pre- and post-seismic displacement time series for station PIXI, with and without coseismic displacement jumps.

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Figure S2. ALOS InSAR data fitting. The figures are the same as in Fig. 2 except that the interferograms are not shadowed by their neighbors. Top panel: observations (portions of data not used in modeling are delineated with black frames). Left and right panels show even and odd numbered ALOS path interferograms, respectively. Central panel: model predicted, and bottom panel: postfit residuals. Red dots are the surface nodal points of fault model patches.

Figure S3. Identification of fault surface breaks. a) ALOS range offsets and traces of identified fault breaks. b) ALOS azimuth offsets and traces of identified fault breaks. c) Comparison of fault surface breaks. Red lines: inferred from the SAR data, black lines: mapped by field geologists³, and yellow dots: surface nodal points of fault patches used in this study. Our result differs from that of Xu et al.³ at the northeast end of the rupture. Theirs was based on aftershock locations and may not be as accurate as our reading of the SAR interferograms.

a Incidence angle in the swath center

b Perpendicular baseline between pre- and post-seismic satellite orbits

^c A for ascending pass, D for descending pass.

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Table 2 Fault slip model.

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*Length: fault patch horizontal length; depth: fault lower edge depth; dip: fault dip angle; strike: fault strike direction, clockwise from north; lat & long: coordinate of fault patch lower left corner; SS & TS: strike slip and thrust slip components in mm.

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backstory

Revealing ruptures

Zheng-Kang Shen and colleagues discovered an unusual cure for car-sickness while trying to understand the mechanics of fault deformation during the Wenchuan earthquake.

■ What was the objective of the work? We wanted to understand the mechanics

of the fault rupture of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China, which killed more than 80,000 people. The earthquake took place along the Longmen Shan fault. The rupturing of this fault reflects ongoing tectonic stress build-up that results from the eastward movement of the Tibetan plateau thrusting over the relatively stable Sichuan basin. We hoped that by measuring crustal deformation during and after the Wenchuan earthquake, we could better understand the geometry and extent of the fault rupture, as well as the mechanism of the earthquake and its associated tectonic processes.

■ **Why did you choose this particular location for the fieldwork?**

The earthquake chose the location for us, providing an exceptionally rare opportunity for study. Scientifically, few (if any) Earth scientists anticipated an event of this magnitude in this locality, even though the steep western margin of the Sichuan basin is known to be seismically active.

■ What sorts of data were you after?

We collected GPS data, together with radar data obtained from satellites. We used this data to measure crustal deformation resulting from the earthquake, and to determine fault geometry and slip distribution during the earthquake.

■ **Did you encounter any difficulties?** We encountered most of our difficulties during the early phase of our fieldwork, which was carried out immediately after the quake. We came across roads that had been buried by landslides, collapsed bridges, vehicles hit by fallen rocks and a traffic accident in a congested road lined up with

disaster-relief trucks. The living conditions were poor, with a lack of adequate food and water supplies at some camping grounds, and no power supply. Several of us suffered

A crew member setting up GPS survey instruments at a mountain-top site after an hour-long hike. He is being watched by a local villager who helped carry survey equipment to the site.

from altitude sickness while climbing mountains to survey sites. And there was the psychological trauma of seeing so much destruction.

■ **Did you have any encounters with dangerous animals?**

One of our team members was stung by a hornet when working at a survey site. He had to run down a half-hour-long trail before being rushed to hospital.

■ Any low points?

On many occasions we were shocked by the scale of the devastation that the quake had caused. Among all the emotional lows, the one that stood out the most was when we had just finished a day of work and sought lodging assistance at a local government office. A lady in her thirties quietly arranged tents and meals for us. Afterwards, she asked, with a gentle and quiet voice: "Didn't you know such a big one was coming?" We learnt later on that she had lost her husband in the earthquake.

■ What was the highlight of **the expedition?**

Having overcome all sorts of difficulties and hazards, we were elated when — two weeks after the quake — we had our instruments up and running at the first field site.

■ **Did you learn anything new about yourself or your team members?**

One of our crew members got car-sick while sitting in the back seat of a fourwheel-drive Toyota Land Cruiser, following a long drive along a treacherous rural road. With no other cure available, we put him in the front seat of a small and shaky pickup truck, with tiny wheels and thin body parts. Bumping up and down, he sat in the car for the next several days, and never got car-sick again. We learnt that expensive and comfortable vehicles can still offer great discomfort, and that cheap uncomfortable vehicles are sometimes the best cure.

This is the Backstory to the work by Zheng-Kang Shen and colleagues, published on page 718 of this issue.