Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Applied Physics and Mathematical Modeling
DOI: 10.54254/2753-8818/2026.38222

Earthquakes from a Physics Perspective: Fault Activity, Stress Accumulation, and Energy Release

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Abstract. Earthquakes are among the most destructive natural events, yet their immediate cause is mechanical: processes at work within the Earth's crust. This paper approaches earthquakes from a physical standpoint, following three closely related processes—fault activity, stress accumulation, and energy release—and draws on the literature together with a case study of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake to trace how the three interact. Tectonic motion keeps loading faults, but friction can hold that motion in check, so stress and elastic strain energy build up slowly in the surrounding rocks. Once the accumulated stress grows large enough to overcome the resistance on a fault, rapid slip and rupture may follow, and the stored energy is released in several forms, including seismic waves, fracture energy, frictional heat, and permanent deformation. The Wenchuan case is instructive: crustal deformation in the region had been comparatively slow, yet a great earthquake still occurred once enough stress had gathered and rupture spread through a complex fault system. Clarifying how fault motion, stress buildup, and energy release fit together therefore helps explain earthquake mechanisms and gives seismic-hazard assessment and disaster-risk reduction a firmer scientific basis.

Keywords: Earthquake Physics, Fault Activity, Stress Accumulation, Energy Release, Wenchuan Earthquake

1. Introduction

Few natural hazards match earthquakes in destructive speed: within a very short time, ground motion can damage buildings, disrupt infrastructure, and shatter communities. From a physical perspective, however, an earthquake is more than a natural disaster. It is a mechanical process involving tectonic motion, fault friction, stress accumulation, rupture, and the release of stored energy. Plate motion loads faults continuously, yet faults do not always respond smoothly; many stay locked for long periods and then fail all at once, producing seismic waves and crustal deformation [1]. Understanding this physical sequence serves two key purposes: it explains the occurrence mechanism of earthquakes and strengthens the scientific basis for seismic hazard assessment and disaster risk reduction.

This paper examines earthquakes through three closely connected physical processes. It begins with fault activity, explaining how fault motion, friction, and instability combine to produce rupture. It then turns to the loading stage, in which tectonic forces slowly build stress and elastic strain in the

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rocks before failure. The final part follows the energy itself: how stored elastic energy is released during rupture and redistributed into seismic radiation, fracture, and heat. The 2008 Wenchuan earthquake serves as the case study because it took place in the structurally complex Longmen Shan fault system and involved large-scale rupture along multiple fault segments [2, 3]. By combining literature analysis with evidence from this single well-documented event, the paper connects basic physical principles with a major real-world earthquake and clarifies how fault activity, stress accumulation, and energy release form one continuous chain.

2. Physical processes of earthquakes

2.1. Fault activity and earthquake rupture

A fault is a fracture, or a zone of fractures, in the Earth's crust along which the rock on either side can move relative to the other. Its connection to seismic events is direct: most tectonic earthquakes occur when a fault slips abruptly. By their dominant direction of movement, faults fall into three broad classes: normal faults, reverse or thrust faults, and strike-slip faults. Extension of the crust favors normal faulting, compression favors reverse faulting, and in strike-slip faults the two sides move mainly past each other in a horizontal direction. Actual fault movement is rarely this regular, and most seismic events contain both vertical and horizontal displacement components.

The presence of a fault does not, by itself, mean that the two sides slide past one another without pause. Friction opposes relative movement. In a simplified model, the frictional force takes the form

$$F_f=\mu_f N \tag{1}$$

where Ff is the frictional force, μ_f is the coefficient of friction, and N is the normal force acting across the fault.

As long as the tectonic driving force acting on a fault remains lower than its frictional resistance, the fault stays locked. Tectonic movement does not stop to wait, so the rocks surrounding the fault keep deforming even though the fault surface itself barely moves.

The stick-slip mechanism captures this behaviour. Brace and Byerlee showed that frictional surfaces in geological materials can hold still for a period and then jerk forward suddenly, and they proposed this process as a physical explanation for shallow earthquakes [4]. A block pulled by a slowly stretching spring provides a classic physical analogy: friction pins the block in place while the spring stretches further and further, until the pull finally exceeds the maximum frictional resistance and the block lurches forward.

A real geological fault is far more complicated than a block-and-spring system, but the model makes one point plainly: slow and continuous tectonic motion can trigger abrupt fault movement over sufficient time

The 2008 Wenchuan earthquake shows how intricate real fault activity can be. Field investigations documented major surface ruptures across the Longmen Shan fault system: approximately 240 km of surface rupture developed along the Beichuan fault, with a further rupture of about 72 km along the Pengguan fault [5]. The Beichuan rupture combined reverse and right-lateral motion, evidence that a major earthquake need not involve simple movement along a single uniform fault.

Fault activity is thus the mechanical foundation of earthquake generation. It leaves a puzzle, though: tectonic plates move very slowly, so how can such sluggish motion end in a sudden, powerful earthquake? The answer lies in how stress and elastic energy accumulate.

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2.2. Stress accumulation before an earthquake

Stress is the force acting on a unit area of material. In its simplest form,

$$\sigma=\frac{F}{A} \tag{2}$$

where σ is stress, F is force, and A is the area over which the force acts.

Within the Earth's crust, plate motion subjects rock to continuous forces, producing compression, tension, or shear. Among these stress types, shear stress dominates earthquake generation, as it drives relative displacement between two fault planes.

Long-term tectonic motion supplies most of this stress. Plate movement is slow compared with the motions of everyday life, but it continues for years, centuries, or even longer without pause. On a fault locked by friction, that movement cannot be fully absorbed by immediate slip; the rocks near the fault must take up the strain instead. As long as the deformation remains mainly elastic, part of the mechanical energy delivered by tectonic motion is stored in the rock as elastic strain energy [1].

A spring helps here once more. The elastic potential energy stored in a spring is

$$U=\frac{1}{2}kx^2 \tag{3}$$

where U is elastic potential energy, k represents stiffness, and x represents deformation.

Rock is not an ideal elastic medium, so this equation serves as a simplified physical analogy rather than an accurate quantitative description of crustal deformation. The principle behind it still holds: as elastic deformation builds, so does the stored energy. A fault can therefore look quiet at the surface while stress and energy continue to accumulate underground.

A fault's resistance is also more complicated than a single fixed value. In laboratory studies, Dieterich found that rock friction varies with factors such as time, previous slip, and sliding velocity [6]. In other words, the initiation of an earthquake depends on both the applied tectonic stress and the dynamic variation of fault movement resistance.

In simple physical terms, earthquake preparation can be described as a contest between two effects:

tectonic loading, which keeps raising the force that drives movement, and fault resistance, which holds that movement in check.

Wenchuan makes the point vividly. Deformation across the Longmen Shan region had been relatively slow, yet the earthquake of 12 May 2008 was extremely large. Research showed that the rupture involved several fault segments and that some of the largest fault slips occurred near fault junctions [7]. In short, a low visible crustal deformation rate does not indicate low seismic hazard potential.

One explanation lies in the tectonic setting of the Longmen Shan. The Tibetan Plateau is moving generally eastward, while the Sichuan Basin has a relatively strong crust; where the two interact, stress can become concentrated along the Longmen Shan fault system [3, 8].

The Wenchuan case carries a broader physical lesson: the rate of surface deformation alone cannot determine how dangerous a region is. Long-term tectonic loading, fault friction, fault geometry, and the mechanical properties of the surrounding rocks all shape how stress accumulates.

And once that stress is sufficient to drive unstable fault movement, the stored elastic energy can be released rapidly.

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2.3. Energy release during an earthquake

An earthquake does not create its energy from nothing. Much of it was stored in the crust long beforehand, through sustained tectonic loading and elastic deformation. What the earthquake does is change the mechanical state of the fault in an instant, and in that instant part of the stored elastic strain energy is released [1].

Rupture usually begins small: one patch of a locked fault fails first. That initial slip changes the stress acting on nearby parts of the fault, and if neighbouring areas are also close to failure, the rupture continues to spread.

All of these processes unfold far more rapidly than the stress accumulation that precedes them. Stress and energy may gather over decades or centuries, while a major fault rupture runs its course within seconds or minutes.

Not all energy released during an earthquake is converted into ground shaking.

One part leaves as seismic-wave energy. The waves travel away from the source through the Earth and along its surface, producing the ground motion detected by seismometers and causing much of the damage associated with earthquakes.

Another part is spent extending and modifying the rupture zone as fracture energy. Frictional heat builds as the two sides of the fault slide against each other, and the rocks near the fault may also undergo permanent deformation.

Therefore, the simplistic claim that earthquake energy is entirely converted into seismic waves constitutes a scientific oversimplification. Seismic radiation is only one entry in the complete energy budget of an earthquake [1].

An earthquake's physical size can also be tied to the properties of fault rupture. A key quantity here is the seismic moment:

$$M_0 = GAD \tag{4}$$

where M0 is seismic moment, G is the shear modulus of the rock, A is the area of the fault that ruptures, and D is the average amount of slip.

The equation links fault behaviour to earthquake size in a direct way: if a larger fault area ruptures, or if the average displacement is greater, the seismic moment generally grows.

Building on seismic moment and energy considerations, Kanamori developed the physical foundation of the moment magnitude scale, Mω, now widely used for describing large earthquakes [9]. Unlike some older magnitude scales, moment magnitude stays close to measurable physical properties of the earthquake source.

Wenchuan underlines the importance of rupture complexity once more. Slip along the Longmen Shan fault system was not distributed evenly: Shen et al. found especially large amounts of slip near several fault junctions and proposed that barriers between fault sections broke during the earthquake, allowing rupture to spread through multiple segments [7].

Rupture of this kind runs like a cascade. Once one fault segment fails, the stress around neighbouring sections changes; if another section is already close to failure, it can rupture too, and the process may continue along the fault system.

The three major physical processes discussed in this paper integrate to form a complete sequential mechanical mechanism.: tectonic motion, fault locking, stress and elastic-energy accumulation, fault failure, rapid rupture, energy release and seismic waves.

Wenchuan shows how tightly these processes are connected. Fault geometry influences where stress can accumulate, accumulated stress determines where rupture may begin, and interaction

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between fault segments shapes how far a rupture can spread. An earthquake, on this view, is not a single sudden event but a complete mechanical process.

3. Conclusion

This paper has examined earthquakes from a physical perspective by following three closely related processes: fault activity, stress accumulation, and energy release. Seen this way, earthquakes are neither isolated accidents nor purely sudden events. They originate from long-term mechanical evolution, in which continuous tectonic motion acts on crustal faults. Because friction can keep faults from moving freely, some segments stay locked while the surrounding rocks gradually deform, accumulating stress and elastic strain energy.

When the stress on a fault grows large enough to overcome its resistance, the fault may become unstable and slip rapidly. This sudden rupture releases part of the elastic energy stored over long periods, and the released energy is distributed among seismic waves, fracture energy, frictional heat, and permanent deformation. Among these forms, seismic waves produce the strong ground motion that causes much of the damage associated with earthquakes.

The 2008 Wenchuan earthquake epitomizes these coupled physical processes in a real seismic event. In the Longmen Shan's complex fault system, long-term tectonic loading was followed by large-scale rupture along several fault segments. The case shows that slow crustal deformation does not necessarily indicate low earthquake potential, and that fault geometry and fault interaction can strongly influence how a rupture develops.

The study has limitations worth stating plainly. It relies mainly on literature analysis and a single case study, with no original field measurements or numerical simulations, and simplified physical models such as friction and spring models cannot capture the full complexity of real faults. Future research could combine GPS, InSAR, seismic-wave observations, laboratory experiments, and numerical modelling to examine stress accumulation and fault rupture in greater detail. A deeper understanding of these processes would in turn support better seismic-hazard assessment and disaster-risk reduction.

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