



China Floods 1991

July 1991

Here's how the Hong Kong media got the news of our visit:

On 22 July, the Governor of China's Anhui (pronounced Ahn Way) province broke a 40-year closed-door policy and gave World Vision permission to operate a flood relief program.

Geoff Renner and I joined four colleagues from World Vision Hong Kong and one from Bangladesh for our visit to China, while Paul Nichols remained in Hong Kong to assist with project writing and communications.

We even found Mark Emerson and Richard Hunter holed up in a corner. They were wowing our Chinese colleagues with NIS (Australia's latest iteration of computer programs).

As Geoff reported to the news in Hong Kong, and by yesterday, we were both repeating on television and radio, "The whole of eastern China is one vast flood plain. It is hard to distinguish between lakes, rivers and the five million acres of rice fields under water."

Anhui province experienced fifty days of rain at a time when it's normally dry.

Here are some of the statistics given to us for Anhui province, an area about twice the size of Tasmania with a population of 55 million people:

44,000,000 people affected (that means houses flooded, or crops lost).

467,000 rooms were destroyed (most homes are single room dwellings).

8,300,000 people trapped by floods.

10,000,000 people relocated out of flood zones.

41,740 villages trapped by floods.

1,335 industries disrupted.

302 km of road foundation destroyed, and 733 km of road damaged.

6,708 train services were cancelled.

213 bridges wrecked.

10,776 animals were killed.

340 people were killed.

The loss to agriculture amounts to an incredible A\$23,175,000,000!

There are statistics for everything: school buildings destroyed, administration offices, telephone wires, power lines, irrigation systems, furniture lost, stored grain waterlogged, and personal effects lost.

The bottom line is that this is a flood larger than China has previously experienced. 18 of China's 33 provinces have been affected.

“Rivers are at their highest level on record,” one official said.

“How long have you been keeping records?” I asked.

“Over a thousand years,” he replied.

Everywhere we went, it was clear that the people were glad we had come, the first non-governmental organization to be invited and to respond.

We were welcomed at an official ceremony by the governor of Anhui province. The Governor is no small-time politician. He governs a population of 55 million people—more than our Prime Minister.

The local media covered the reception, and we were instant television stars all over the province.

Later, the Governor's representative told us, “You are welcome to be operational to enable you to be accountable to your donors and to respond to the most urgent needs.” It was encouraging to discover they had investigated World Vision and how we work. They were prepared for us to set high standards of accountability and were open to providing them.

Notes from my Diary.

News about the floods spread because of Katherine Lo in the Hong Kong office. She saw a small story in the paper about China requesting international aid. She rang Beijing and asked permission to bring in a local media team. “Check around,” she told the official. World Vision is a good agency.” Within two hours, he called back to say, “Yes.”



All local Hong Kong agencies raised more than HK\$200,000,000 in the first five days after the first media visit. That's more than A\$30 million, and it's likely to double!

Video shows people using doors for rafts, brooms and spades for paddles.

A seventy-year-old man says, "I've never seen flooding like this."

When the flood comes, people have a good spirit. As time passes, spirits weaken, and despair comes.

"They have a file on World Vision. They have a file on everyone. They are very good at filing."

We openly describe World Vision as a Christian humanitarian agency everywhere we go. The Director of Provincial Civil Affairs says, "We understand the spirit of World Vision ... our goal is the same even if our methods are different."

All the numbers are as long as international telephone numbers.

Why isn't this a big international story? The media don't think it is news until CNN has covered it.

Western media, except those with World Vision, have been denied permission to visit the area.

Flooding started on May 18. Now 8 weeks. Equal to half the normal full-year total.

In earlier floods, many more people died. This time, the flood mitigation plans tempered the peaks.

Anhui province was sacrificed for the greater good.

In the middle of the conference, one of our team knocks over a glass of water. The Governor makes a joke about floods even here.

We present the Governor with a World Vision of Hong Kong clock. "Time is important," says David Ngai.



Sights along the Road.

A father holds up a naked baby and kisses it warmly on the face and tummy.

A man sits behind a street market table. He doesn't seem to be selling anything, but he has the biggest smile for his customers.

No sign of Mao-style clothing. Nylon shirts and blouses. White, pink, orange, red and many pastels.

Twenty geese squat precariously on the roof of a taxi-cycle. Defying logic and gravity.

Children carry a long bamboo stick with a white rag tied to the end. It's for herding geese.

Toddlers have pants split up in the middle. No nappies.

A mother sits in a doorway, massaging the back of a toddler draped over her lap.

Kids play in the dirt with cups and a bowl of water—mud pies.

A mother stands her baby on a windowsill. He rocks unsteadily a metre from the ground. Mum's hands are inches away.

Every doorway has people in chairs inside and outside. It's hot.

Lots of watermelons for sale. At lunch, we discover you're supposed to spit the pips on the floor!

Earth colours. Houses of mud or red clay bricks. Roofs of straw or grey tiles.

Mother & Father about 25. Two babies under 2. Brought clothes, two beds, and some grain. Lost crops, houses, and furniture. House of mud. Nothing left. Now living in a brick store with hundreds of others. 3 beds side by side. Two unrelated families. A bit cooler inside. 38° and 90%

humidity outside. There are 8,000 people here with pigs and kids mixed up. No sanitation. I saw three toilets.

100,000 families moved over a week in this one county. No lives were lost in the move.

Thousands of fishing boats used to shift people, not fish. I told the official he used to be a fish fisher but had become a fisher of men—wry smiles from the visiting Christians. The Biblical allusion goes right over the official's head. Pity.

Any single county in this province would be rated as a major disaster elsewhere.