

## THE ORANGE LIFE VEST: MEMORIES OF THE WUHAN FLOOD

By Wendy

It looked like a huge lake, endless and tranquil, in Jiangnan plain, the land of plenty in China.

However, I was heartbroken, standing on high ground nearby and looking. Just a few roofs of houses emerged out of water, reminding me that tens of thousands of houses and millions of acres of farmland were right under the water.

Yangtze River is the longest river in Asia. In summer 1997, a so-called “once-in-a-century flood” threatened the safety of Jiangnan plain, especially a metropolitan city, Wuhan, population 11 million people. (Yes, that Wuhan, the same place as the original outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.)

Back then I was a young journalist, working for a well-known newspaper. Voluntarily I joined a team to cover the events and became the only female reporter in that team.

Our team flew to Wuhan, the geographical center of China’s economy, the largest transportation hub in inland China, and a shipping center in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River. Its importance went without saying. The government decided to defend Wuhan at all costs. At the time, I didn’t understand what that meant.

I went to a county called Jian Li. The bank of Yangtze River was just beside the town, piled with sandbags, three to four meters higher than the ground, literally “a running river above ground.” How dangerous was it!

The residents and soldiers were working day and night to enhance the bank and monitor it for any breach.

A hundred miles away, the bank burst abruptly during a night storm, flooding and wiping out a lot of small villages. No one knew the casualties exactly (usually the number was censored and would not be told to the public). But a 9-year-old girl, holding a trunk and hanging there for three days and nights, was rescued by the military. Her pictures touched millions of hearts.

So when I saw that “lake,” I thought the same flooding situation had happened again. Unfortunately, it had not.

The government had ordered the man-made breach of the local bank to reduce the pressure of flood and defend Wuhan. They had done it in other areas. “We had nothing left!” Many evacuated villagers cried to me desperately. Their houses, their livestock were gone. Their crops stretching to the horizon and about to mature very soon were gone too.

Some of them were evacuated forcefully while sleeping. They lost everything overnight.

Sometimes I cried with them. Their stories were so heartbreaking, I could not repeat even today.

I felt sad and angry that some people were treated as inferior to other people. I didn't know where and when the officials would decide to sacrifice more peasants' homelands.

I, as a journalist, was supposed to report the truth. But I could not. At last I was only allowed to write about the humanitarian disaster to the government, but not to the public.

I felt guilty for betraying the kindness and trust of local people. Wuhan is called "one of three furnaces in China." I was assigned to stay with a local family. They gave me, a stranger, the only electric fan in the house to use.

A local young man took off his only life vest and gave it to me. There was no way to buy any life-saving equipment then. The refugees had very limited daily supplies, but they shared their precious clean drinking water with me. A driver invited me to get in his parked car to get some rest and let the AC on, when I almost fainted in the heat.

The local people depended on me to let their voice be heard, their sacrifices be understood, their despairing situation be aided.

I have no idea if my efforts had ever helped those people. Wuhan was saved. But I am never sure if it was the right thing to do to defend Wuhan in that way.

I brought that orange life vest back to my city and kept it for many years.