

**Light the Darkness:
Story of the Hong Kong Red Cross,
1950–2000**

Tai-lok Lui



香港大學出版社

HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS

Hong Kong University Press

14/F, Hing Wai Centre

7 Tin Wan Praya Road

Aberdeen

Hong Kong

© Hong Kong University Press 2001

ISBN 962 209 529 1 (hardback)

ISBN 962 209 530 5 (paperback)

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the Publisher

Secure On-line Ordering

<http://www.hkupress.org>

Cover photo: Leung Sai-kit

Cover design: Dick Yeung

Printed and bound by United League Graphic & Printing Company Limited
in Hong Kong, China



Contents

Message from the Chief Executive of the HKSAR and Patron of the Hong Kong Red Cross, The Honourable Tung Chee Hwa	xi
Message from the President	xii
Acknowledgements	xiv
1. A World with No Strangers	2
2. Foundations: Beginning Trickle by Trickle	10
3. Never Neglecting the Needs of the Poor and the Weak	18
4. Change	32
5. From Receiving Help to Self-Help and Helping Others	44
6. Bearing Witness to an Era	56
7. Building a Caring Society Together	78
Appendices	
1. Vision, Mission and the Fundamental Principles of the Hong Kong Red Cross	83
2. Hong Kong Red Cross's 50 Years of Service	85
3. Patrons and Council Members of the Hong Kong Red Cross in 2000–2001	88
4. The Office-Bearers of the Hong Kong Red Cross from 1949 to 2000	90

Viewed from a distance, this was a scene of early winter. The morning sun shone through a thin layer of fog and reflected a golden hue on the tiled roofs of village houses. On this day, sunlight splashed across the Lake Dongting region, emanating a deceptive feeling of warmth in the incipient chill that had descended with December.

On the embankment by the river, villagers came and went. Children dashed past, laughing as they ran ahead in their play. Despite the constant dust and dirt raised by trucks plying among the nearby villages, the village by the side of the river seemed undisturbed and had typical quiet country air reminiscent of scenes in movies and novels.

However, this scenery could only be enjoyed from a distance.

When our car stopped at the entrance to the village, a closer look revealed that the summer floods had not completely receded. A large portion of the fields was still under water. Many of the village houses by the side of the road were merely temporary open brick structures, covered with two large plastic sheets that the owners had scavenged. One of the plastic sheets covered the windward wall, and the other stood for the roof — the house's only protection against

Victims of natural disaster: Jiangxi Province, 1998.





Delivery of relief food supplies.

the wind and the rain. Some villagers who had lost their homes to the flood could only be housed temporarily in the classrooms of the local primary school. In theory, since the flood had receded, they could now go home. In reality, they were still homeless, and could be so indefinitely.

The farmers who came to town to receive the relief rice said, 'We haven't had a harvest for two years.' When they spoke, they were expressionless and their voices subdued, but to the casual observer it spoke volumes of their pain and suffering. The relief supply of three bags of rice per family would have to sustain them for the entire winter.

This was the situation in a village in the Hunan Floods disaster areas I visited in December 1999.

People made homeless by flooding: Jiangxi Province in 1995.



According to the locals, the floods were merely one aspect of their many problems; mountain communities suffered even harsher conditions and subjected to worse hardships than the communities in the regions around the lake.

In China, communities that seriously need assistance due to natural disasters and poverty are not confined to the villages and towns in the Lake Dongting region in Hunan. In fact, human suffering caused by natural and man-made calamities are universal problems to which not one country has a monopoly.

The following story happened in a very different part of our world — Rwanda. Among the crowd of refugees on their way to Zaire was Ingabire, a six-year-old girl. It was dark and chaotic. The refugees were running for their lives. Ingabire clung to her mother's skirt, for fear of being separated. Still, Ingabire lost her grip in the tide of refugees which swept them apart, leaving her standing alone in the middle of nowhere. Ingabire was subsequently brought to the orphanage at Ndosho where she stayed with other children who had suffered the same fate. She sat alone every day and hoped that she would find her mother. A representative from the International Red



Refugees of Rwanda: 1994.

Cross Delegation noticed the lonely Ingabire, found out what had happened and helped her get registered. Ingabire was given a plastic bracelet with her name and a registration number written on it. When her father searched for her and filled out a tracing request at one of

the Red Cross refugees centre, they re-established contact via the computerized tracing service. Ingabire was sent to the centre where her mother was waiting for her. When they finally met, they could find no words to express their feelings.¹

It is ironic and a constant source of wonder that in spite of the strides we have made in modern information technology, the world is powerless in eradicating war, poverty and natural disasters.

Famines in North Korea, earthquakes in Iran, refugees in Rwanda and typhoons in Vietnam, just to name a few, are universal problems of the greatest gravity. Progress in living standards and technological innovations in some developed countries do not mean that other countries, particularly the developing ones, are able to prevent or deal with different kinds of natural and man-made disasters. Neither does the accumulation of global wealth mean that the world will therefore no longer be troubled by poverty and scarcity in resources.

By holding out a helping hand towards people mired in hardships caused by natural disasters, war and poverty in mainland China or elsewhere, we have already suppressed all sorts of prejudices and risen above the differences in nationality, race, culture, and religion. We give from our hearts, show concern and care, and are willing to make contributions. Just as in the delivery of relief goods to the victims of the floods in the Lake Dongting region, the citizens of Hong Kong have responded both in supplying provisions and in the rebuilding of infrastructure whenever and wherever the need has arisen. Today, when the citizens of Hong Kong make donations to help others, it is based entirely on humanitarian and altruistic principles.

What the flood victims in the lake region learnt about Hong Kong may only be limited to news reports that they had seen on television, first-hand experiences retold by young men and women who had been working in the south, or merely from the two words 'Hong Kong' printed on the relief packages. Yet, the appreciation and gratitude which is reflected towards this far-away community is unquestionably heartfelt and genuine.

That day, an old woman who had received rice in town grabbed my hands and expressed her gratitude. It is all I remember of the day

except for my urgent need to respond to the call of help from a stranger in a place I had hitherto never been. I ceased to be a bystander who could turn a blind eye to people whose lives had been ravaged by the floods.

Today, to many Hong Kong citizens, disaster victims, refugees, or people living in poverty outside Hong Kong are all strangers. They may not know the name of the disaster area; yet based on the belief that everyone's life and dignity should be respected and protected, we are all glad to extend our help to the injured and the sick, those in hardship, and the weak, regardless of their race, nationality, religion, political beliefs, or social background.

This spirit of humanity is also the most important basic principle of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Henry Dunant, founder of the International Red Cross Movement, wrote in *A Memory of Solferino*, a book with a tremendous and lasting impact: ". . . the women of Castiglione, seeing that I made no distinction between nationalities, followed my example, showing the same kindness to all these men whose origins were so different, and all of whom were foreigners to them "Tutti fratelli [all are brothers]", they repeated feelingly.¹² Love and care for fellow men is based on the principles of humanity. That is what it means.



Henry Dunant (1828–1910): Founder of the Red Cross Movement.

Some people feel that this kind of love and care for our fellow human beings is innate, surfacing naturally when the occasion arises. In fact, this sort of love and concern towards strangers has to be nurtured. But if it were not for the driving force of organizations with similar beliefs and goals to bring to our awareness the need for such care and concern, I am certain the response of the people of Hong Kong would not equal to what it is today.

The Hong Kong Red Cross is a voluntary organization dedicated to promoting humanitarian work in Hong Kong. Over the years, members and volunteers of the Hong Kong Red Cross have worked tirelessly to provide assistance to all kinds of people who are in need — appealing for donations in aid of victims, promoting blood drives as well as organizing volunteer activities. The development of the Red Cross's work in promoting humanitarian aid has gone hand in hand with the transformation of Hong Kong from a 'refugee society' with little public spirit, to a community that cares about others and is ready to lend a hand to those in need, including people outside of Hong Kong. These are two 'stories of Hong Kong' which have

In the battle of Solferino, Dunant saw the destructiveness of human aggression and the meaning of humanitarianism.



developed in tandem. Indeed, the 50-year history of the Hong Kong Red Cross in promoting humanitarian work is a fitting testimony to the successful nurturing of Hong Kong society and of Hong Kong citizens into loving and caring human beings.

¹ See 'Ingabire, lost and found', in *Special Report: Red Cross Offers Hope in Hell* (Hong Kong Red Cross, 1995).

² Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino* (Geneva: The International Committee of the Red Cross, 1986), p. 72.

The moral sense of the importance of human life; the humane desire to lighten a little the torments of all these poor wretches, or restore their shattered courage; the furious and relentless activity which a man summons up at such moments: all these combine to create a kind of energy which gives one a positive craving to relieve as many as one can. There is no more grieving at the multiple scenes of this fearful and solemn tragedy. There is indifference as one passes even before the most frightfully disfigured corpses. There is something akin to cold calculation, in the face of horrors yet more ghastly than those here described, and which the pen absolutely declines to set down. But then you feel sometimes that your heart is suddenly breaking — it is as if you were stricken all at once with a sense of bitter and irresistible sadness, because of some simple incident, some isolated happening, some small unexpected detail which strikes closer to the soul, seizing on our sympathies and shaking all the most sensitive fibres of our being.

Dunant, p. 73

As Henry Dunant has said, ‘But then you feel sometimes that your heart is suddenly breaking — it is as if you were stricken all at once with a sense of bitter and irresistible sadness, because of some simple incident, some isolated happening, some small unexpected detail which strikes closer to the soul, seizing on our sympathies and shaking all the most sensitive fibres of our being’ — what provokes people’s genuine feelings do not necessarily have to be horrendous disasters and tragedies. We all possess a heart capable of expressing sympathies. The question is: How do we turn this sympathy into concrete and sustained humanitarian activities?

Since its inception in 1950, the Hong Kong Red Cross has continued to carry out its work doggedly, engaging in various operations which promote humanitarianism. Its role is to promote the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in Hong Kong. The Red Cross Society concretely fulfils the spirit and mission of the movement through a wide range of services. In mobilizing volunteers to participate in its various operations, the meaning of

its services is no longer limited to assisting the injured, the sick, victims of disasters, and the weak, but also in allowing volunteers to understand the social significance of helping and caring for others through participating in volunteer work. More directly, the Hong Kong Red Cross promotes the spirit and values of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in society through concrete projects and different forms of practice. Educational promotion and social service are united as one, and through its many projects, the Hong Kong Red Cross has put the humanitarian principles into practice.

With hindsight, the path taken by the Hong Kong Red Cross over the last fifty years is exactly the communal spirit of mutual care and concern that it has built together with the continuously growing and developing Hong Kong society. Reviewing the Hong Kong Red Cross's work over the last fifty years, we shall well understand that it was by no means easy to establish a spirit of community in a migrant society. From relying on foreign sailors and expatriates living in Hong Kong to donate blood to eventually having local Chinese as the major blood donors, a lot of effort had to be made. Not only did local people need to change their erroneous ideas about volunteer blood donation, they also had to be persuaded to care about strangers and be willing to donate blood to people they did not know but who were in need. What I would like to emphasize is that this transformation is not a necessary stage in the process of development of every society. In fact, to be able to successfully mobilize local citizens to participate actively in volunteer blood donations within such a short time, and under such difficult circumstances (especially with the immigrant background of the postwar Hong Kong population), this achievement must be affirmed. Whether or not a citizen has directly benefited from blood donation services, he or she would understand that this kind of blood donation activity, built upon the spirit of helping others without rewards, best testifies the power derived from the mutual care among people. Volunteer blood donation outperforms other methods in effectively solving the problem of shortages in blood supplies.

In fact, mobilizing the public to participate in volunteer blood donation is only one among the many programmes organized by the Hong Kong Red Cross. Other projects which are equally representative of the humanitarian work of the Red Cross Movement include international and local relief operations, special education

and hospital school services. Two commonalities could be found among these programmes. The first is the provision of direct assistance and services to those in need. The second is the motivation from a basic humanitarian principle that it is each person's birthright to receive respect and care regardless of his or her race, religion, gender, social standing or physical condition. Based on humanitarian considerations, the Hong Kong Red Cross has never ignored the needs of children and youth with physical disabilities and of sick children with long-term hospitalization even during times of scarce resources. When it comes to disaster relief operations in Hong Kong and elsewhere, the Hong Kong Red Cross has always been the first to offer help.

When promoting humanitarian and welfare work, the Hong Kong Red Cross has always emphasized the significance of volunteer work. The Ladies' Working Groups, which had been established since the beginning of the organization, were set up to assist in preparing surgical dressings for local hospitals. In 1956, the establishment of the Red Cross Youth offered a brilliant prospect for the development of youth programmes in later years. As mentioned above, apart from helping to promote the organization's affairs, the volunteers' participation is itself an educational process, which allows volunteers to learn the valuable lesson of humanitarianism and care for others through practical application.

The development of the International Red Cross Movement responds to one question posed by Henry Dunant, 'Would it not be possible, in time of peace and quiet, to form relief societies for the purpose of having care given to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers?'¹

Again, in Dunant's words, 'Spontaneous devotion of this kind is more easily to be found than one is inclined to think. There are plenty of people who, once they were sure they could be useful and convinced that they could do real good, with the encouragement and facilities given by the administrative authorities, would certainly be prepared to go, even at their own expense, and undertake for a limited time such an eminently philanthropic task. In this age, which is often called selfish and cold, what an attraction it would be for noble and compassionate hearts and for chivalrous spirits, to confront the same dangers as the warrior, of their free will, in a spirit of peace, for a purpose of comfort, from a motive of sacrifice!'²

The development of volunteer and youth groups by the Hong Kong Red Cross is based on the belief proposed by Henry Dunant. We could even say that this emphasis on volunteer work threads through all the operations of the Red Cross. To concretely evaluate the achievements of these volunteer operations is indeed rather difficult. In fact, it is not necessary for us to use some simple measurements to evaluate the contribution of volunteer operations. The volunteer service of preparing surgical dressings for hospitals has continued for 40 years without interruption. It has only recently been stopped due to changes in the hospitals' scheduling arrangements. The contribution by these volunteer groups certainly could not be demonstrated by the quantities of medical materials produced. Like a tiny but continuous trickle, this was an internally inspired volunteer operation which had continued for a long time without rewards. Its value and significance is not usually exhibited in sensational scenes but is found in the regular volunteer work done day after day which demonstrates the spirit of the Red Cross.

Over the last fifty years, the Hong Kong Red Cross has always upheld the spirit of humanitarianism, and has never abandoned the injured, the sick, and those who are weak. It emphasizes the significance and contribution of volunteer work, and raises the awareness of Hong Kong citizens to care for others and participate in the creation of a caring community in Hong Kong.

At the dawn of the new millennium, the work of the Red Cross definitely must change to cope with changes in the environment. The history of the Hong Kong Red Cross has demonstrated that not only does it respond sensitively and timely to changes in the environment, it has never lacked in new concepts and innovative power. Therefore, many of the future changes will only be changes in form or in the operational procedures. Humanitarian motivation is the unchangeable motto of the Hong Kong Red Cross. This mission which looks simple on the surface has in fact helped the Hong Kong Red Cross develop extensive services over the last fifty years. This has enabled it — whether in terms of scope, areas of services, and ability to mobilize volunteers — to become an excellent Red Cross Society in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

¹ Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino* (Geneva: The International Committee of the Red Cross, 1986), p. 115.

² *Ibid.*, p. 118.