As the world remembers the terrible tsunami in 2004 and the flooding of New Orleans in 2005, China should also remember the greatest flood of the past century, a disaster forgotten by history."

These were the words of Steve Harnsberger, the grandson of Thomas "Lyt" Harnsberger, an American missionary who witnessed the world's greatest flood in 1931 and led the efforts to rebuild the broken levees on China's Grand Canal.

On December 30, the city of Gaoyou in neighboring Jiangsu Province opened a museum to commemorate the victims of the 1931 flood which directly and indirectly killed 3.7 million Chinese.

In the summer of 1931, the Chinese people suffered the worst flood of the 20th century as the three great rivers of China - the Yangtze, the Yellow and the Huaihe River - rose past record levels. More than 1,000 levees ruptured leaving in their wake a year-long legacy of death and misery.

Tens of thousands were drowned in their beds. Across China, 160,000 square kilometers of farmland and townships were flooded, including 1,440 kilometers of the Yangtze River valley, adding to the vast inland sea around Gaoyou in northern Jiangsu Province.

Harnsberger notes that the total flood covered an area almost equal to the whole of England plus half of Scotland, or an area equal to New York State, New Jersey and Connecticut.

"It is, in fact, true to say that the flood of 1931 is the greatest flood on historical record," the China National Flood Relief Commission report stated.

Gaoyou was at the epicenter of the Huaihe River flood where, on August 26, 1931, ocean-size waves whipped up by a typhoon swept away the earthen levees along the Grand Canal.

The Gaoyou Lake above the city was filled to overflowing after eight weeks of torrential rain. The swollen lake gouged six huge breaks in its levees and floodwaters poured their fury down upon the city, killing thousands as they slept, flooding 25,600 square kilometers for three to six months, and forcing 5 million peasants to flee their fertile lands.

"The 1931 flood is the worst disaster in Gaoyou's history," says Ni Wencai, vice mayor of the city. "It happened 75 years ago and even the old people cannot tell the whole story. The historical records in Gaoyou have only a 2,000-word description of it. Young people today have almost no idea about what happened."

Ni says the idea of the museum originated from a letter sent by Harnsberger in 2004. He had visited Gaoyou with his family for the first time in 2001. "He suggested the setting up of an exhibition to show local people the story that his family has been told about for three generations.

"It was a good idea," Ni says. The Gaoyou government then started work to revive the lost memory of the disaster. "We went to the Second Historical Archives of China (in Nanjing) and searched in libraries and the Internet."
With the archival material Harnsberger had preserved, the Gaoyou government was able to set down the historical record of the catastrophe. "We spent a lot of time on it and the history we found is really impressive and shocking," says Ni. "You will never understand the extent of the tragedy unless you see the evidence with your own eyes."

At the end of 2005, the museum opened to honor the memory of the victims of the 1931 flood and the work of five people - a Christian missionary, a Buddhist hermit, a Chinese general and the world's most famous aviator couple.

When the Buddhist monk, Hermit Lin, learned of the flood from a newspaper report sent to him by his family, he descended from his mountain retreat and sold everything he owned, including his home in Shanghai, to raise 200,000 Chinese dollars at that time for flood relief. Only 20,000 Chinese dollars remained for his own family.

Unfortunately, almost no information or records exist today about Hermit Lin. The only bit of information uncovered by the Gaoyou government is a copy of a letter he wrote to the China Foreign Famine Relief Committee when he donated the money. In the letter he wrote: "How can I save myself if I do not help to save others?"

Chinese general (and engineer) was Wang Shuxiang who supervised levee reconstruction operations. He led 20,000 laborers under 70 foremen in rebuilding vital dikes. Reconstruction was carried out entirely by hand and the 40-meter-wide "pounded earth" levees that the workforce rebuilt are still standing firm today.

"Wang was from a rich family in Huai'an. He had studied in France and owned a factory at that time," says Harnsberger, who visited Wang's descendants in Huai'an for the first time in October 2005.

American Presbyterian Missionary Thomas "Lyt" Harnsberger was based in Taizhou in Jiangsu where he founded and helped develop about 30 churches in nearby towns. He took over the challenging reconstruction project of the levees on the Grand Canal.

He initiated the Gaoyou dike project, managed the Foreign Relief Commission money and distributed the 450,000 tons of American wheat provided to China to feed the flood victims. Work on the levees was finished on time and under budget. The new dikes helped re-establish the livelihoods of some 8 million Chinese.

The famous aviator couple were Charles and Anne Lindbergh. They played a pivotal role in the 1931 flood reconstruction work by carrying out aerial surveys of the Jiangsu flood area. They had just made the first-ever flight across the North Pole to the Orient, and from their Lockheed monoplane they witnessed a scene like no other: the inland sea created by the floodwaters. The Linberghs immediately volunteered their services to do essential survey work on the extent of the flood.

Damaris Peck Reynolds, daughter of Willys Peck, the counselor of the American Embassy in Nanjing at the time, wrote: "There was no suitable dock so as Linbergh anchored the plane out in the lake, small boats loaded with well wishers went out to the plane and the Linberghs were quickly brought ashore ..."

An extraordinary and compelling tale of the disaster can be found in Anne's writings and some of the stunning aerial photographs the couple took of the flooding and dike breaks in Gaoyou are now part of the museum exhibition. Anne described the tragedy of the 1931 flood more fully in her book, "North to the Orient."

In his speech, Hutch Harnsberger (the son of Thomas Harnsberger) said: "My father recruited engineers, draftsmen, clerks and work supervisors. It was all hand-labor for no power equipment was used even for the pile-driving and rock-facing on the lake side. All the workers were housed, fed and paid daily and well cared for."

Hutch made the speech in the Sunday service held in the Huaiyin Christian Church during his family's first return visit to China in 2001.

He was only eight when he witnessed the havoc caused by the flood. He said: "My father
returned about 10 percent of the original funds that were left over to the Relief Committee in Shanghai. They said it was the first time in 100 years that had happened."

Says Xia Mingfang, a historian and professor of the People's University of China who attended the museum's opening ceremony: "The museum has presented a lot of good pictures, many of which I have never seen. Some pictures had been taken by Chinese photographers and there are also a lot taken by Americans like Charles Linbergh that I have also never seen before."

Xia says he is curious to know why Gaoyou locals seem to have so little knowledge of the 1931 flood. "The Grand Canal has been a very important waterway since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The transports went along it to Beijing and the Central Government was very much concerned about it. The Yellow River is also part of it and has flooded frequently but the 1931 flood was definitely the worst."

The exhibition serves to recall the catastrophic events in 1931 and the suffering and heroism of the local people who labored to safeguard their homes from future major floods as they restored their way of life.

"Because of my family, I became the local expert on the great flood," says Steve Harnsberger. "I have to tell the story because while just to remember the disaster is very significant, the after-story of what happened is another really powerful story. It's about how people take care of one another."

"The story has been told and now completed by three generations of my family."

With thanks to Steve Harnsberger for his family's preservation of the precious archives needed for the retelling of the story.

**Extract from Anne Linbergh’s "North to the Orient"**

Our plane was the only one in China which had enough range to survey the outer limits of the flood. On our arrival in Nanjing, we offered to help the National Flood Relief Commission by mapping the damaged areas ...

At first we noticed only the obviously flooded fields along the banks of the river, the green of late crops showing through the water. Then gradually we became aware of a number of "lakes" which constantly increased until finally they gave the impression of one big lake, enormous, stretching as far as we could see. I realized with a shock, this was not a "lake," it was all flood.

**Factbook of the 1931 flood**

* Twenty-five million people and 160,000 square kilometers of China were affected in various ways by the greatest flood in China's history.
* Approximately 140,000 people drowned initially and 3.7 million people were to die later as a result of the flood.

Forty percent of the population in the affected regions were forced to migrate for the greater part of the following winter.

* A crop worth 900 million yuan was lost and in one case a total loss of 2 million Chinese dollars at that time was borne by a community whose average family earnings did not exceed 300 Chinese dollars a year.
* Relief work extended to 269 counties.
* Free relief was granted to just under 3 million people and 1 million were housed in camps.
* In addition, the relief commission distributed more than 500,000 articles of winter clothing and more than 2.5 million people received medical attention.
* About 2.8 million workers were employed on flood relief construction projects.