Operation Overcoat

Walking down the dusty streets with the bustle of hundreds of cyclists around me, I had a hard time imagining how this place must have looked only a few months before: swallowed up by water which turned the area into an almost serene landscape, disturbed only by the splashing of oars and the groans of people pulling them. Photographs taken to prove the gravity of the natural disaster only added to the feeling of unreality, a feeling that would accompany me all through those two days.

We had come to Jinhu, as this small town between Yancheng and Huai’yin is called, in order to find out whether the overcoats and quilts donated by Amity had been distributed to the people who needed them most.

As it turned out, nothing had been distributed yet, but the officials had drawn up a list of criteria according to which they decide who would be entitled to an overcoat, a quilt, or both. Never before had I thought about how many problems have to be tackled in such an apparently simple undertaking as the distribution of quilts and overcoats. It is fairly easy to just hand them out if you have enough of them. But what do you do if you have 4,000 overcoats and 3,000 quilts, which need to be distributed among thousands of flood victims? You have to make a choice, and you must decide who needs them most. This is certainly not an easy task.

The officials in Jinhu had solved part of the problem by drawing up a list of criteria for identifying those to whom coats and quilts would be issued, namely:
- elderly people who have no children to look after them;
- families of which one member suffers from a long-term illness;
- families with a handicapped child;
- orphaned children; and
- the poorest of the poor.

In our talks with the officials, we learned that the flood was not the only problem they were struggling with, although it was by far the most pressing one. Many people in this area suffer from cancer caused by several factors. First of all, Jinhu’s drinking water, which comes from nearby rivers, is of bad quality. Secondly, when locals repair the river dikes during the summer months, they have no fresh water at hand. They drink “dead” water for two months of the year. On top of that, farmers in the area use a lot of pesticides on their crops. Very often some of it spills over into the rivers, poisoning the water. Compared with all of this, the flood seemed to be a minor headache.

The next day we visited a home for the
elderly in Dafeng County. After the floods two new buildings with room for 30 more people with no children to depend on were constructed with Amity funds. At the time of our visit, the home was not yet fully occupied. We met 12 elderly people, singles as well as couples. They participated actively in running the home. Some were busy in their communal garden, while others were preparing meals in the kitchen. Like many institutions in China, the home is partly self-supporting. The earnings of a small restaurant are spent on the upkeep of the home. They also turned their spacious courtyard into a parking area, which the government rents for 20,000 yuan a year. Everything looked excellently organized. We visited one resident's room. She proudly showed us her new overcoat. It was far too big for her, but she was visibly pleased with it. Outside we met a deaf-mute man walking around with a nasty-looking head injury from a fall. Apparently the wound had not been properly taken care of. Subsequently, Tan Liying suggested the home recruit a nurse to provide better medical care for the residents. This proposal made great sense, as the home was located outside the village, and it would take precious time to call for a doctor in case of an emergency.

Not far from the home for the elderly, we dropped in at a primary school. Its classroom building, newly constructed after the floods, was partly funded by the Amity Foundation. The school had nine teachers for 178 pupils. The difference between poor families and those a little better off showed clearly in the clothes the children were wearing. Some of them were not warm enough, had big holes in their clothes or ill-fitting shoes, while others were dressed according to the latest Chinese fashion and rode brand new bikes.

In another county, local officials at the County Overseas Friendship Association produced a detailed list of everyone who had been given quilts and overcoats. The list showed people’s names and age, the various reasons for their inclusion, plus the recipients’ signatures or fingerprints. We asked to see some of the recipients and were taken to the homes of some of those who lived nearby in the same township. The members of four families in the township had each received an overcoat. However, we were surprised to learn that three of these families had relatives in Taiwan. One was a family of five with two members who were wage earners. In another family, a woman proudly showed us the new house her sons were building in her backyard while the rest of the family ran a small “home tailor shop” in the front room facing the street. All of this made us question whether these people really needed Amity sponsored overcoats. Tan Liying openly spoke her mind with the officials. They apologized and conceded that they had misunderstood Amity’s criteria. Fortunately, Amity’s flood relief program was marred by only few incidents of mishandling, and throughout our tour this was the only case of its kind we saw.

On my way back to Yancheng, I pondered what I had heard and seen in those two days. As a teacher in China I know how difficult it is to get anything off the ground, especially something on such a large scale as the flood relief which the Amity Foundation had shouldered spontaneously, despite a lack of experience in this field and a clearly felt shortage of staff. The geographical distances between the various regions involved combined with numerous communication difficulties, the least of which are purely technical in nature, made the flood relief program an arduous task which Amity braved with amazing results.

Although she was tired even before she set out on the tour, Tan Liying added to our schedule by requesting to see the final stages of projects which were not included in our program. In some cases she had to pressure the local officials to speed up the distribution process, in others she gently suggested alterations in impractical architectural designs, but wherever she went, she was warmly welcomed by everyone. Her reward were the smiles on the faces of those who proudly showed off their overcoats or went home with a new quilt. I felt privileged to accompany her and to share that reward.
After The Floods Receded
by Ting Yen-Ren

So used to coming ‘down’ to villages from ‘above,’ the officials begin to toss out very direct, even aggressive questions, without greeting or self-introduction. The farmers seem equally used to this, parting with no more information than was asked for. I am back in Xuyi County in North Jiangsu, where I visited last summer when vast areas were under water and people survived in makeshift houses on dams and dikes. This time, I have come to investigate the results of relief and rehabilitation efforts partially supported by the Amity Foundation.

Accompanied by local officials, I find myself the natural center of attention, or, someone from somewhere still higher ‘above.’ Since I do not speak the local dialect, I often have to check my comprehension with the officials standing next to me or have them repeat my questions.

We finally end up sitting in the village head’s house. He gives me a clear picture of how this new village has been built, and how far the government has sponsored the project.

“How about food?” — “The government has been supplying rice and flour, one jin (0.5 kg) per person per day, which we have to buy with cash, except for those with real difficulties, who can get it free. The supply will stop by the end of March, so we will have difficulties between that time and the time of wheat harvest in June.”

“Besides the government supply, do people have any grain at home?”

“No. We lost the wheat crop last June when the rains came, and we did not plant anything last fall. And we cannot expect a good crop this year because the wheat did not get any base manure and we have no money to buy chemical fertilizers.”

“Is the county government aware of the food problem for the coming spring?” I turned my question to an official sitting next to me.

“Yes. By then, we may let people borrow...” He is not clear of the solution himself.

The village leader does not seem too worried, he says: “Anyhow, no one will starve to death.”

A water-buffalo is slowly pulling a plow where there used to be a huge temporary settlement for the flood-displaced farmers. The UN helped supply the bricks and other building materials. Near the plow, several people are clearing the ground of the brick debris left from those shelters.

Not too far away, I notice on a wall an old slogan, the color of which has faded: “Thanks to Amity for its care and help.” This is where a temporary primary school used to be, one of three which were built by the Amity Foundation in this area. They were all built next to the UN-assisted temporary settlements. Now all the shelters have been torn down, and the bricks and other materials have been used for the construction of permanent buildings. The same happened to the schools.

“Bottoms up. Bottoms up.” The unadorned words and laughter urge me to finish the cup of hard liquor in front of me. “We can only offer you the ordinary folk’s dishes. If you really do not think this is inferior to those official banquets you often attend, just drink up.”

I am really fortunate to have the chance for an “unaccompanied visit.” As I walk into the village where I worked for four years but have not visited for 10 years, my host and hostess, not knowing I am coming, are just about to serve a feast to some of their friends and relatives. Immediately, I am pushed to the table and forced into a seat. “Have some food. Have some food.”

Late into the night, the chatting is still going on. The conversation has turned political, and people complain a lot about local party leaders.

“But I was told that during the floods cadres really worked closely together with the masses of the people,” I ask.

“Yes, for a short while. If they had not done so, they would have lost their jobs... But when it came to distributing the relief materials, a cadre’s relative always had some advantage over others, however small it might be.”

“We have been trying to prevent this

Ting Yen-Ren
from happening,” I claim.

“How? To be fair, it was difficult. You had families that had harvested nothing and families that had harvested a little bit. If you only gave to those with nothing, the other group would complain. If you included the other group, the first group would be unhappy.”

“The post office and the tax office should not have received any relief funds, but they did. Now they are planning to put up new buildings in town with that money.”

“There is also this so-called Amity Foundation...”

“Oh, yeah?” I am suddenly alerted. “It sent us a lot of cotton padded overcoats and asked each recipient to put down their signature and seal. How could this help as people can always make these things up?”

“But isn’t this better than nothing?” I am trying to defend myself.

“Yes, better than nothing. Those categorized as the old with no children to depend on each got one. Others in difficulty were at the mercy of the village leaders. The things often went to officials’ relatives. One township official took one coat and replaced it with his own old coat, but he forgot to take out the 40 yuan he had left in the pocket, was therefore caught and almost lost his job. In one village, people categorized as ‘in difficulty’ ended up casting lots at a village meeting to decide who should get the coats.”

On my way back, I decide to drop in at a 90-bed home for the aged which Amity helped build last fall. The new buildings have been completed and are clean, tidy and bright. Amity has also given three padded quilts for each bed. Residents have to be over 65 with no children to depend on. Quite a few have already moved into the new rooms. Their houses were damaged in the rains last summer.

A 76-year-old man, severely hunch-backed, and with only a few teeth left, grabs my hand, holds it tightly in his own and repeatedly says: “Thank the Party, Thank Amity. We owe everything to the Party, to Amity. We will never forget the Party and Amity. We are grateful. Thank you...”

Thank us? Is this what we have wanted? Do we want to create, or perhaps to perpetuate, a world of thankers and thankeds, where the thankeds lead the thankers, like shepherds leading the flocks? If we want to end this division, these people at the grass-roots level should have power. They should be so organized as to take every measure to prevent corruption and degeneration in people’s organizations and governments. What is required is a greater trust in the masses of the “common folk” of whom people often have no high opinion.

An Interview With Amity’s Chief Administrator

Mr. Yan Jiabao is Director of the Amity Foundation’s Administrative Division. In the spring of 1992, he gave the following interview in which he summarizes recent trends in Amity’s work to the Amity News-letter.

Q: After the floods in 1991, the Amity Foundation handled almost two million US dollars in relief and rehabilitation funds. Has Amity turned from a development organization into a relief agency?

A: No, our flood projects were no more than an episode, though a very necessary one. Amity was founded as a development organization and we will stick to our mandate. Last year’s floods were an exceptional disaster, which hit especially hard right on our door step. We therefore decided to do our best in supporting our people’s relief and rehabilitation work, as did countless other organizations inside and outside China. Thus, we appealed to our overseas friends for special funds. The organization of flood-related projects kept us occupied for most of the latter half of last year. Relief money has now been spent. Almost all of the projects have been completed, and apart from necessary evaluation, I don’t expect us to do any more flood-related work. Now we are concentrating again on our regular work.

Q: Amity has four different programs...
divisions: education, medical and health, social welfare, and rural development. How many ongoing projects does Amity administer at this point, and what is the annual financial turnover?

A: Excluding the teachers project because of its size and unique long-term nature, we are currently running about 40 projects. The annual financial volume of all divisions together is approximately two million US dollars.

Q: And how big is your staff?

A: We have 20 people. They all work here in the Nanjing office, the only office in mainland China to date. But the actual project work is shouldered by only 10 people. The others are support staff: four drivers, a typist, a caretaker, two accountants, one person to accompany visitors, and other administrative staff.

Q: What percentage of all funds goes into Amity’s overhead?

A: In the past, we could manage with 3.5%. But as communication and transportation costs have risen sharply, we now retain up to 5% of all donations to cover administration.

Q: You joined the Amity Foundation two years ago. Can you tell us some highlights of Amity’s work since then?

A: An important event in the last two years was the consultation we held in November, 1990, with many of our overseas sponsors. It inspired us with new ideas and helped improve our work in many aspects. Among the participants in the consultation were four friends from the Philippines, representing the Philippine-China Development Resource Center and the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. Since then, we have intensified these and other south-south contacts. After an Amity delegation went on an exposure tour to the Philippines, a Philippine church delegation paid a return visit to China. A group of 14 Filipinos is currently studying acupuncture at a hospital here in Nanjing. We arranged and sponsored this. Two staff members from our Medical and Health Division just returned from Bangkok, where they attended a conference on community health work in Asian countries. Though our funding comes almost exclusively from developed industrial nations, we projects travel an awful lot. In 1991 alone, Ms. Li Enlin, deputy head of the Medical and Health Division, made four major trips, travelling more than 8,000 km overland, 3,000 of them by bus over bumpy roads. Ms. Zhuang Ailing from the Rural Development Division traveled to over 20 counties in Jiangsu, Anhui and Shandong provinces last year.

Q: Have you considered establishing branch offices outside Nanjing?

A: In the long run, it might be wise to do that. The problem is basically one of finding qualified people. For the time being, we try to appoint church leaders in the provinces as our representatives. We have given a block grant of half a million yuan to the Zhejiang Christian Council and asked its vice president, Rev. Deng Fucun, to identify feasible projects. He will relay his proposals to us, and upon our approval he will initiate and supervise the projects on our behalf.

Q: A final question - what brought you here?

A: Previously, I worked 12 years as a tour guide and manager for the China International Travel Service. I reached a point at which I had served the privileged long enough and thought it was time to serve the underprivileged.
Associate General Secretary Takes Course
In Development Studies

Gu Renfa, Associate General Secretary of the Amity Foundation and head of its Rural Development Division, recently returned from a three-month development course at Selly Oak College in Birmingham, U.K. Speaking in Hongkong on his way back to Nanjing, Gu expressed his gratefulness for the chance he had been given to study. "When I first joined Amity, I had neither experience nor any theoretical background in this field. More people in Amity should have the chance to take this kind of study course."

Gu reported that there were 20 participants from 10 different countries as diverse as Bolivia, South Africa, and Afghanistan in his course. Six to seven hours a day were spent in the classroom, with numerous small group discussions about development problems. Gu especially appreciated lectures about development theories and learned a lot from discussions with other course participants. "Not that we adopt uncritically what others have done," he commented, "but we can learn from their successes and their mistakes."

Returning to Amity, Gu will pass on what he has learned to Amity colleagues. He plans to teach young staff about different development models and theories.

Asked whether his studies in Britain changed how he looked at Amity projects, Gu said: "Here in China, we have often understood rural development in terms of building factories in the countryside, so that people could earn money and buy what they need. We have had several Amity projects of this kind. But sometimes these rural factories produced things that could not be sold afterwards. Now I realize that it would be much better to find ways of raising the living standard of people in a given area by helping them produce what they need, instead of helping them earn money. We have to look more towards what the people can do with their own resources."

Gu added that a universal experience shared by all course participants was that no project could succeed unless it really worked with the people, instead of merely for them. "We need to help people not only to develop economically, but also to foster a spirit of self-reliance, so that they will be able to look after themselves."

On a final note, Gu mentioned that he brought home some material to further his studies. "I am really interested in the relationship between the churches and development. I didn’t learn very much about this in England, but I brought back some material on this topic. Amity is an organization with a Christian background, and we need to understand better how that relates to what we are doing."

More Asian Exchange

Organizers of grassroots health care systems in many Southeast Asian countries show great appreciation for China’s socialism. This was reported by Ms. Li Enlin and Ms. Wu An’an from Amity’s Medical and Health Division who participated in a seminar on "Community Health Work in Especially Difficult Circumstances" from March 1 - 8 in Bangkok.

The Amity representatives gave papers on the training of health workers in China’s countryside and on Amity’s work with handicapped children in the context of China’s reform. What drew
the greatest attention of participants, however, was Li's report on her personal experience as a barefoot doctor during the Cultural Revolution. Her account will be published in India and Vietnam, where the introduction of a barefoot doctor system is being considered."

This was the first time I was part of a south-south exchange," said Wu. "It helped broaden my vision and gave me a renewed understanding of the development achievements China has made over the past decades."

The seminar was organized by the American Friends Service Committee; 45 participants came from 13 Asian countries, representing both government agencies and non-governmental organizations.

NEWS IN BRIEF

In April and May, the Amity Foundation held a two-month course for parents of mentally handicapped children. In evening classes held twice a week, two Chinese and two overseas experts, among them Amity teacher Katie Neal from the USA, helped a group of 15 parents develop a greater understanding for their handicapped children and trained them to to teach their children basic everyday skills.

Fourteen community health workers from the Philippines attended a three-month training course in acupuncture at the Nanjing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine. The full-time course, which ended on May 31st, was a joint program of the Amity Foundation and the Philippine-China Development Resource Center in Manila.

From March 15 - 30, an Amity delegation of six government officials from Religious Affairs Bureaus and United Front Work Departments in Beijing and Jiangsu visited Germany, Switzerland and Finland to study church-state relations and the role of Christian churches in Western societies. The group, which was led by Ren Wuzhi, director of the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council, was accompanied by Rev. Bao Jiayuan, Associate Secretary General of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China, and by Amity staff member Ms. Cao Jingxin, who served as interpreter.

Amity Project Proposals 1992/1993 has been published and mailed to overseas supporters and funding agencies. For 14 programs or major projects in the fields of health, social welfare and rural development, the Amity Foundation is seeking grants totalling 4,297,922 yuan (US$778,186). Copies of the Project Proposals are available from the Overseas Coordination Office.

Leading ophthalmologist and CBM consultant Dr. Norval Christy, who frequently visits China on short-term assignments to assist Amity's medical work, canceled his spring visit due to illness. Dr. Norval Christy, a retired Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission doctor, served for forty years in Pakistan and is a world-renowned specialist in the prevention of blindness.
Welcome in April, May, October and November!

The year 1991 saw a new record in the numbers of overseas visitors at our Nanjing office: Altogether, we received over 300 people! This meant a great amount of organizational work. Visitors had to be accompanied, tickets needed to be purchased, hotels to be booked, project exposure tours arranged. As our work could not be carried out without the support of overseas friends and funding agencies, we welcome the range of interest we are receiving from abroad and will continue to strive to make our work better known and to build bridges between China and the international community.

However, in order to increase our efficiency and to make the visits of overseas friends more meaningful, we intend to concentrate the reception of visitors in the spring and fall seasons. Therefore, visitors are requested to plan their visits to the Amity Foundation in the months of April, May, October and November whenever possible. As we apologize for any inconvenience this might cause our partners and friends, we hope for their kind understanding.

The Amity Foundation was created at the initiative of Chinese Christians for the purpose of promoting health, education and welfare in the People's Republic of China. It is an independent Chinese voluntary organization in which people from all walks of life may participate. Amity represents a new form of Chinese Christian involvement in society, through which Chinese Christians are joining hands with friends from around the world to serve the needs of China's modernization.

The Amity Newsletter is distributed free of charge four times a year. If you would like to receive the Newsletter, or desire further information on any of our projects, please feel free to write. Institutions receiving the Newsletter are welcome to reprint any article from it. Credit should be given to the Amity Newsletter, Quarterly Bulletin of the Amity Foundation.

Funding for the work of the Amity Foundation comes from sources, both Chinese and foreign, religious and nonreligious, individual and organizational. Inquiries and suggestions concerning possibilities for new project initiatives are welcomed, as are contributions for the direct support of the Amity Foundation. Checks or bank drafts made payable to the Amity Foundation may be sent to the Nanjing Office.

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