Reviving A Zest For Life:
Church-Run Homes for Senior Citizens Blaze New Trails

China is fast reaching a point where more than 10% of its population will be over 60 years of age, making it what experts describe as an “aging society”. While age and seniority are still regarded with respect in Chinese society, social norms and conditions are rapidly changing. There are emerging problems related to senior citizens that demand increasing public attention. Quietly and without much fanfare, Chinese churches are at the forefront in responding to these problems in different parts of China.

In early 1988, the Church in Changsha City, Hunan Province, initiated a home for the elderly. This pioneering effort sparked off a blossoming of church-run homes for the elderly all over the country. Ten years later, there are 17 of them with 7 still under construction. All these together can house up to 800 people. After a decade of experience, 29 representatives from these homes gathered at the Nanjing Seminary August 25-28, 1998 for an Amity-sponsored conference to exchange views and learn how to improve services in these homes.

As participants excitedly shared their stories, they discovered amazing similarities. Many of these homes had very humble origins in small private homes or old, converted church buildings. Run by just a handful of church members and having few sparsely furnished rooms, most of them could only accept a few people at a time. Over the years, however, support for these homes have grown and so have their capacities. The story of the Wenzhou Home for the Elderly in Zhejiang Province is quite typical. It started in a rented private residence with a capital of 5,000 yuan (or US$ 610) and could initially only house 11 people. Today, with its 98 rooms, it can take in more than 200 people at a time. In Linghe County in Inner Mongolia, after years of struggle, the church-run Ronggu Home for the Elderly has recently received much-needed donations for the construction of a new 4-storey building.

Good management and affordable fees make the homes popular among local communities. Both the local churches and the Amity Foundation have contributed to these by providing effective leadership and basic management training. These have laid a sound foundation for advancements in care for the elderly. The conference in Nanjing was designed to introduce some of these new advances. Ms. Chen Zhi Ling, a Chinese American who has done extensive research on care for the elderly in California, informed Chinese participants about the work of US-based organizations working with the elderly, their various approaches and experiences. Mr. Qian Ya Yong, Director of the Civil Affairs Bureau of Jiangsu Province provided an overview of the situation in China, key issues, government policies and trends in work with the elderly. Included in the program was a visit to the Gulou Home for the Elderly in Nanjing.
In order to improve, many of the homes still need to train a group of care-givers with more skills in management and greater knowledge of nursing and psychology. For most participants, the Nanjing conference served not only as a forum for exchange but a short training session in improving services.

Medical care for the elderly topped the agenda. Many of the church-run homes do not have any clinic attached or basic medical facilities. Some lack even basic medical instruments such as a stethoscope, sphygmomanometer or emergency medicines. Most of them rely on occasional visits from volunteer doctors, many of them retirees. The few that are linked to hospitals and have better medical facilities are usually those with founders who have included medical doctors. There was an urgent call for greater attention to be paid to healthcare facilities in the homes.

Apart from the physical, there was equal stress on the importance of mental health for senior citizens. The Changsha City Home for the Elderly was held up as a model in this area.

Elderly residents there are grouped into self-help committees that organize a variety of activities ranging from concerts (in which they themselves participate) to sightseeing tours and field trips. These activities have regenerated a “second Spring” and revived a zest for life. They not only promote a sense of belonging (to a “family and home”) among elderly residents but also help draw them out of their introversion and loneliness.

Relying mostly on the enthusiasm, support and donations of church members, church-run homes charge very little for their services. In Wenzhou, where the fee is 135 yuan per month, 100 yuan is spent on food and management. In many instances, variations in fees depend on the ability to pay of the residents. Quite often, if a patient/resident has a very low or no income at all, s/he is given a subsidy or even free services. In Hangzhou’s Jian Qiao Home for the Elderly, it is the rule that those without families and without incomes are given free services. This is topped with a monthly personal allowance of 30 yuan. Low fees do not mean poor services. The Beijing Xiang Shan Home for the elderly has garnered praises (and television coverage) for charging the lowest but providing some of the best services in Beijing. In many areas, church-run homes charge the lowest fees among homes for the elderly but they usually offer comparatively good services. It is no wonder that more and more of the elderly are moving from other institutions to those run by the church.

Yao Fu Ying, Medical Division
The Amity Foundation

Health For All: Views from the South

They could barely conceal their tiredness as they sat in the bus, ready for a quick visit to a church-run home for the elderly in Hong Kong. The 11-member Amity delegation had just arrived for a two-day stopover after a hectic 10 days in the Philippines. Despite their fatigue, delegates could not contain their exhilaration. They wanted to see and learn as much as they could. “How was your Philippine tour?” I asked Dr. Wang Jiansheng, coordinator of Amity’s medical projects in remote Qinghai Province. “Wonderful!” he beamed. “I’m truly grateful for this great opportunity to see the Philippines and Hong Kong. You know how rare it is for people like us to travel outside of China.” This was true for most members of the group who came from the far-flung provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Guangxi.

“What struck you most about the Philippines?” I persisted. “The enormous gap between the rich and the poor!” Wang replied, without any hesitation. He paused, then added with a frown, “It’s something that’s happening in China, too!” The study tour of the Philippines had been an eye-opener. The Chinese delegates marveled that there could be more than 25,000 NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) existing in a relatively small country like the Philippines.

Dr. Qiu Jie, Director of the Lanzhou office for the Coordination of Amity Medical Projects, was amazed that a small NGO like the Philippine-China Development Resource Center (PDRC) could have played host to the
Chinese delegation. With only a miniscule staff of 6, it had arranged an intensive itinerary that required networking with a wide range of health NGOs, government-run hospitals and church-related institutions in several parts of the Philippines. All these provided comparison between the work of the government and that of the NGOs.

The visit brought the Amity group from Manila in Central Philippines to Baguio in the north. Their encounters with Filipino NGO leaders and observations of their work, particularly in providing desperately needed health services to the poor, left deep impressions. For the Chinese delegates who are themselves engaged in rural health projects as coordinators and Amity staff, seeing Filipino NGOs in action was nothing short of inspirational. The independence and competence of Filipino women struck them. The deep social commitment and passion for work among Filipino NGOs gave them encouragement in their own work. The hygiene and good management of medical institutions they visited provided models for emulation. So did the networking style of NGOs like the PDRC.

Adding drama to the visit, typhoon “Gading” struck as the delegation made its descent from the Mountain Province to Manila. Heavy rains caused landslides and floods that closed off mountain roads and highways. Despite the inconvenience and even a touch of danger, there were lessons to be drawn from the experience. One participant enthused over the fact that ordinary citizens voluntarily turned out in the wind and rain to remove fallen trees from roads and to help direct traffic. “This kind of civic spirit is not easy to come by, even in more developed societies!”

Combining East and West

All this learning and inspiration has not been one-sided. Filipinos have also been learning more about China and the Amity Foundation through an ongoing “south-south exchange program” between Amity and the PDRC. In May 1998, nine leaders and coordinators of health NGOs in the Philippines made a 10-day visit to Jiangsu Province.

Their aim was to learn about China’s health care system. Visits to state-run hospitals in Nanjing and small village clinics in several counties gave them a glimpse of how the system works. They were impressed. China, they concluded, had a much more comprehensive system of health care than the Philippines. What impressed the Filipino delegates most, however, was the successful integration of Chinese traditional medicine with Western medicine in China’s health care system. Visits to the China University of Herbal Medicine and the Nanjing College of Traditional Medicine confirmed this. It was what most interested the Filipino medics. Over the last decade, health NGOs have been urging the Philippine government to do the same. The government has recently set up a Traditional Medicine Unit that is charged with promoting the use of herbal medicine and safe traditional health practices, including acupuncture. However, gaining widespread support for this among Western-trained Filipino medical professionals is still an uphill climb. China, the Filipino group noted, with a tinge of envy, is way ahead in this.

During their brief exposure to a rapidly modernizing Jiangsu Province, the Filipinos had a chance to “update” their images of “socialist China”. Reforms seem to be working. But the growing presence of transnationals in China worried them. Giant drug companies such as Pfizer, Hoechst and Squibb are known in the Philippines as producers of “expensive drugs” and the Filipinos expressed apprehension that these could drive up medical costs in China. The rapid privatization and commercialization of medical care could make basic health care less and less affordable to the ordinary people. In the drive towards better medical facilities and higher technology in the cities, preventive medicine and basic health care may become increasingly less accessible for the rural poor.

Against these apprehensions, Amity’s mobile medical teams were a source of inspiration. The Filipino delegation was touched by the commitment of Nanjing-based specialists to contribute free medical services to the poor in the countryside.

This exchange is part of an ongoing program started in 1991 between the Amity Foundation and the PDRC. It has included the training of Filipino doctors and nurses in acupuncture in Nanjing in 1991-92. An annual lecture series in advanced acupuncture and Chinese traditional medicine given by experts from Nanjing to a growing circle of Filipino acupuncturists in Manila is a feature of this program. The exchanges have also included youth groups, women, minority nationalities, and training in appropriate rural technology such as biogas systems.
Beating the Odds: Amity's Special Scholars

Overcoming prejudice

Overcoming the prejudice in Chinese educational institutions towards students with physical handicaps has been a hurdle. Liu Jian Lu is happy to leave behind. With his legs concealed behind well-cut trousers, twenty-one-year-old Liu looks like most college students in China. But he is no ordinary student. Crippled by polio at the age of 12 when an epidemic swept Pi County in Jiangsu Province, Liu has had to struggle much harder than most just to attain an education. His parents are poor farmers who have made many sacrifices to enable him to continue studying. Obviously an intelligent and very diligent pupil, Liu maintained high academic standards in school. When he sat for the national entrance examinations for entry into universities and colleges, he achieved high scores, raising his hopes of gaining entry into one of China's prestigious universities. These hopes were quickly dashed as one university after another refused him entry. The reason they all gave: he had failed the physical exams.

It was only after much disappointment and persistent efforts that Liu finally found acceptance at the Xuzhou College for Broadcasting and Television in 1997. Since then, he has topped his class in computer science and is obviously the pride of his teachers. During our brief meeting at the college, Liu was introduced to me by his proud and beaming mentors. He exuded an air of quiet confidence as he shared some of his experiences and hopes. Liu is determined to savor college life to the hilt. He is a member of the college chess club. Wearing braces on both legs has not daunted him from taking an active part in extra-curricular activities that include swimming and biking.

Receiving financial support from the Amity Foundation means everything to Liu. He remains in college mainly because of the scholarship provided by Amity's Social Welfare Division. He is trying to absorb as much skills and knowledge on computers in his classes so that when he graduates he will be able to land a good job and contribute financially to his family.

Rekindling hope

Like Liu Jian Lu, turning 12 was an unlucky year for Yuan Wei. That was the year she became blind as a result of an error in medical diagnosis. Brought to hospital for treatment of a fever, Yuan Wei was given an injection that caused an allergy. A rash broke out all over her body. When she was taken to see another doctor, she was diagnosed as having measles and given more injections. These induced blisters and burn marks all over her body, her eyes became swollen, her tongue thickened and she began to lose all her hair. When she was finally brought to hospital and doctors discovered the mistake in diagnosis, she had to undergo surgery involving her digestive system. Despite emergency treatment of her condition, it was too late to save her eyes. Over a period of six months, she completely lost her sight.

At the time, Yuan was studying in Grade Four and one of the top students in her class. When she had recovered sufficiently from the ravages to her health, she was admitted to the Xuzhou School for the Blind where she was placed in Grade One. Now, four years later, at the age of sixteen, she has been admitted to Grade Five in the Nanjing School for the Blind. With a father who receives a meager salary as a carpenter and a mother who has recently lost her job, Yuan has found it financially a struggle to pay for both school fees and medical expenses. Even today, Yuan Wei suffers from extremely dry eyes and has to apply eye drops every 30 minutes. These can cost up to 750 yuan a month. Without support from Amity's Blindness Prevention Division (which provides a scholarship of 1,000 yuan or approximately US$120 a year), Yuan Wei could not have enrolled in the Nanjing School for the Blind nor been able to afford the fees.

Admitted to the school only in February of 1998, Yuan has been doing extremely well in her studies and making up for lost time. Thin and still physically weak, she does not think she will be able to find work as a masseuse after graduation (unlike many graduates of the school). She would like to study English in the future so she will have a special skill, possibly as a translator. At the moment, her favorite subjects are Chinese, math and essay writing and she is a member of the School's Quiz Team. Being at the Nanjing School for the Blind has given Yuan Wei hope for a better future and she cheerfully admits that she smiles much more often these days.

Theresa Carino
“Do Chinese people hate girl babies?”
Questions encountered in the U.S.

Kate Goodspeed became an Amity teacher in 1992 and has since lived and taught in Nanjing, Zaozhuang (Shandong Province) and Hangzhou (Zhejiang Province). She returned recently from a three-month “home assignment” the United Church of Christ requires of overseas personnel. As part of that assignment, she preached on Sunday morning at eight churches in four different states in the US. She reflects on that experience in the following article.

Engaging folks in the United States around their questions about China helped me gain perspective on how to teach my students to look beyond stereotypes when trying to understand American culture. One of the most intriguing questions was about Chinese attitudes towards women and, specifically, girl babies. “Do Chinese people hate girl babies?” Why were they interested in this? In over half of the churches I spoke in there were one or more families who had come to China to adopt baby Chinese girls. As part of that adoption process, these families had spent at least two weeks in China and had come to know something about the country. Because Americans are coming to China not just as tourists but to adopt babies, one stereotype about China might be: Chinese people don’t want girl babies and cruelly abandon them. This is similar, in my mind, to the Chinese stereotype about America: All Americans have guns and kill people with them.

Fortunately, I have lived in China for more than five years and could discuss this issue in some of its complexity. I still remember the Amity winter conference where, just before coming, one of our Amity teachers in Anhui had discovered his fourth abandoned baby. Many of us have visited or worked in orphanages. I, myself, have never had either of these experiences, but I’ve lived in both the countryside and the city in China and I’ve visited with many families and people. I tried to share: the extreme rarity of the phenomenon (even though China’s large population may make it seem like a common occurrence), the poverty and old ideas still found in many areas of the countryside, the very real problems for some rural families if they don’t have a son, the tremendous love Chinese people have for their children (including girls), the certain agony of parents forced by circumstance to give away a child (perhaps the second or third girl!), the rising status of women and girls (especially in the cities), the importance of passing on the family name from generation to generation, and so on. I told them about the Chinese stereotype about American gun ownership and helped them see the similarities and how these stereotypes come about and create fear and animosity.

Yes, there were many other provocative questions about religious and political freedom, pollution and the environment, US policy towards China, my living standards, the interests of my students, and what my work was like. The stories that I told about my students raised other interesting questions about the realities of life for common Chinese people. Wherever I go in the United Church of Christ I meet people who were themselves born in China of missionary parents or are related in some other way to the China missionary experience. The people in my church are remarkably well-informed about the world, generally, but there are still many misconceptions about many parts of Asia. Negative stereotypes, if believed fully, divide us from one another. Some people in both of our governments might want this, but I am convinced that the people don’t want this!

When I came “home” to Hangzhou, I again experienced the loss of American family and friends, but I really did feel “at home,” especially when all my checked baggage finally made it a day after I did (Whew!). I was happy to mount my bicycle once again and ride forth into the mayhem, across the battlefield that has become the street leading to my school, to greet again the egg seller, the people with the frozen chicken legs (they were glad to see their best customer back again), and to banter with the folks displaying the live ducks. Though I discovered yet another small mouse had taken up residence in my home, I’ve found places for all the new CDs, movies, and books purchased in the U.S. I’ve reconnected with my Chinese friends and students from last year. I’ve already had a public showing of the copy of Titanic I brought back, and had the first meeting of a new English Singing Club. ♦
Life on the dykes

In the aftermath of China's worse floods in 100 years, hundreds of thousands of people in several provinces lived in temporary shelters on top of dykes. In some areas, floodwaters did not recede until the end of 1998. The victims were vulnerable to infectious diseases and medicine was badly needed. Tan Liying, Coordinator of Amity's flood relief efforts visited the dykes several times in summer 1998.

We landed on a dyke in a county in Boyang where hundreds of people had lived for over a month in makeshift shelters with plastic sheets or rags for roofs. One old woman took my hand in hers and said: "Aren't we pitiable?" It was mid-July and the temperature was over 38 degrees centigrade on the dyke. A man told us that he planned to move to the city to earn some money but, at such a critical moment, could not leave his wife and 4-year-old daughter behind. His house had been submerged. "It is too hot inside the tent," he said. During the day, he would take his daughter under a tree to escape the scorching sun. In the evening, they would sleep in the open, despite the mosquitoes. When the weather gets cooler, the plastic sheets will not provide very good protection from the cold either.

We visited one village where some farmers' homes had survived because they stood on higher ground. One 3-room house that used to be occupied by 4 persons now had 14 in it. Three families had moved in. Porridge was cooking in 2 big pots. The owner had been generous in offering shelter to relatives and friends but crowded conditions could lead to frustrations and frayed nerves. Food was scarce and while the government did its best to distribute grains, most people only had 2 meals a day--usually of thin porridge and pickles. Signs of malnutrition were beginning to appear on the faces of the victims, especially the children.

Sanitation is a problem for people on the dykes and those in semi-inundated villages. People have to fetch water from nearby village wells or receive water rations from township governments at regular intervals. Human waste is being disposed of in plastic bags that are thrown back into the surrounding flood waters.

In areas suffering from mud or landslides, many of the homeless live in schools and community-owned meeting places or offices. They have lost everything and even the clothes they now wear have been donated. They are ready to resume work on the land, but the challenge of rebuilding is immense. In the ruins of a village in Fujian, which used to be an affluent village, farmers have to start from scratch. "The floods have set us back for at least ten years!" they exclaimed.

Brighter moments

In my visit to Jiangxi Province in September, life on the dykes, though harsh, seemed more stable than two months before. The make-shift shelters and tents were better than those erected at the initial stages. Some had been fitted with doors and windows salvaged from the floods. Bigger shelters were used as classrooms for the children. I even came across some schoolboys wearing brand new jackets and carrying satchels, all donated. I met a group of smiling children chewing candies and looking as if they enjoyed the unusual life on the dykes, at least for the time being.

Donations have given hope to many victims. A 72-year old woman burst into tears of joy when Amity gave her family 60 kilos of rice. Her family of 6, including a paralyzed husband, had been surviving on porridge for more than a month. They were down to their last 2 kilos when the donation was made. A desperate old farmer, on the verge of suicide, changed his mind because he had been touched by the donations. He told Amity staff that he has been encouraged to live and to participate in rehabilitation efforts because he now understands that there are good people in this world who care and are willing to share.

Tan Liying
"How do we get people to take part?"

People’s participation and project management

Workshop participants immersed in discussion.

This was a participatory style meeting. Every organization had to make a presentation. Participants were divided into 4 smaller groups to discuss the main points of the presentations. The groups were then required to report at the plenary sessions. The process may seem familiar to conference-goers outside China but in a country where long speeches, little discussion and large plenaries are the norm, this was a workshop with a difference. It was a meeting to discuss project management co-organized by EZE and 4 Chinese NGOs (Amity, CICETE, CIAD and IRD)* and one of the key words was "participatory".

In her keynote address at the workshop on "Project Management" (held in Nanjing September 8-11, 1998) Kirsten Gade of EZE emphasized: "From our perspective, the techniques of participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation are an especially important component of this workshop. We do regard the participation of the people concerned as an important precondition to long term sustainability of the programs." She also stressed the importance of accountability and the effective and efficient use of resources. "We have to make sure that resources given are shared so that the poorest benefit most," she said. This struck a responsive chord among the 60 workshop participants from all over China. They felt EZE’s three basic objectives of serving the poorest in society, implementing people’s participatory decision-making among the grassroots and improving people’s self-reliance were highly laudable and jived with those of the Chinese government’s own poverty alleviation goals.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Wenzao Han, General Secretary of the Amity Foundation, highlighted the fact that EZE has been Amity’s partner for a very long time—a total of eleven years. "We have gone through a lot of experiences together and in the process developed deep trust," he said. "We not only need to have compassion and commitment but also competence. How can we make better use of scientific knowledge and management skills to manage our projects well, be financially accountable—this should be of primary concern to us. We should be responsible both to the project beneficiaries and to our many warm-hearted partners."

The type of projects that EZE has supported through the years has evolved considerably. During the 1980s, it supported projects such as provision of equipment for a hospital, income generation through fish fodder production and irrigation and drinking water projects. In the early 90s, training and exchange programs were added. By 1995, technical aspects and human resource development were integrated into projects so that they became more holistic. Today, the trend is towards integrating the social dimension through organizing people. Kirsten Gade noted that there were still some weaknesses in many of these projects. Even though the scope of projects has grown, the management capacities of some implementing organizations have not developed fast enough. The issue of gender equality has not received the focus it deserves. Women seldom occupy leading positions in organizational structures and gender analysis is not a component of all program plans.

Prof. Yan Rui Chen of the People’s University in Beijing added that there were three essential aspects of development work: sustainable development; bringing the market economy to the countryside and people’s participation. Other participants pointed out that developing an awareness among people about the critical link between short term results and long term benefits was a difficult but essential task. All agreed that the participatory method was vital for sustaining development. EZE consultants Detlef Hoffman from Germany and Rex Reyes from the Philippines added international flavor and technical expertise to the workshop.

In both discussion groups and plenary sessions, participants raised numerous questions that went beyond those related to project management. They wanted to know what were the best ways to motivate project beneficiaries, to get them involved in project planning. They asked questions about post-project management. Some wanted to know how they could reduce the impact of government policies on the continuity of projects. Not all the questions had answers but they prompted wide-ranging discussions. The participatory method had been put into practice at the workshop and it elicited a high level of satisfaction among participants. When asked to evaluate the conference they gave it a high score of 80 percent! "

*(Acronyms: EZE: Evangeline Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe E.V.; CICETE: China International Center for Economic and Technological Exchange; CIAD: Center for Integrated Agricultural Development; IRD: Institute for Rural Development)
CAST and Amity join hands in water conservation project in Shanxi

The Amity Foundation and the China Association for Science and Technology (CAST) have joined hands in a project to conserve rainwater in the Lu Liang region in Shanxi. Located in the county of Fang Shan, the project covers 16 villages. 1,000 wells have already been dug, providing drinking water to 4,000 villagers. The water conserved in the wells will also supply the drinking needs of more than 800 animals and help to develop 1,500 mu (or 250 acres) of land for agriculture. This will not only raise the total annual income of the villagers by 600,000 yuan (or US$73,000) but will reduce soil erosion. 60,000 tons of top soil is expected to be conserved as a result.

Amity staff attend “Small Projects Fund” meeting in Korea

Gu Renfa, Associate General Secretary, and Qiu Zhong Hui, director of the Rural Development Division, represented the Amity Foundation at the Asia consultation of the “Small Projects Fund”, September 17 to 27, 1998-in South Korea. Participants from NGOs in India, China, Myanmar, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Korea attended the meeting that was co-organized by the EZE of Germany and the KCCSD (Korea Christian Cooperation for Social Development). Jane Yao Zhen Yi of the Hunan Provincial Christian Council was also one of the participants from China. Apart from country presentations and discussions about the objectives and methods of implementation of the “Small Projects Fund”, there were visits to various NGO projects in Korea. There were also discussions about the impact of the Asian financial crisis and the responses to it from different Asian countries.

Relief Work: What Amity has done

Phase One: Relief operations  (July - October, 1998)
Provided assistance to 200,000 people in 42 counties in the provinces of Jiangxi, Hunan, Hubei and Fujian, mostly in the form of rice and quilts. Total grant for emergency assistance was 3.6 million yuan (US$460,606).

Phase Two: Rehabilitation  (November 1998 onwards)
This has started in Fujian, Jiangxi and Hunan where mountainous areas were severely hit by rainstorms and landslides. The rehabilitation projects in these areas include building new homes for the farmers, reconstruction of village schools and water projects that have immediate impact on the livelihood of the communities. 1.5 million yuan (US$181,818) is being allocated for rehabilitation projects in landslide areas.

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.

The Amity Foundation

4 Jordan Road
Kowloon, Hong Kong
Phone: (852) 2366-2769
Fax: (852) 2366-2769
E-mail: amityhk@hk.super.net

The Amity Newsletter is prepared by the staff of the Amity Foundation and printed by the Amity Printing Company, Ltd. Editor: Theresa Carino