At the beginning of this century, a young couple left their hometown, an impoverished small farming village in Zhongshan County, Guangdong Province, and crossed the Pacific for the United States. The husband was an orphan with less than two years of schooling while the wife had only an elementary school education. The husband picked berries and worked as a cook on a farm, while the wife did some sewing to earn minimal wages. They sometimes took on several jobs at the same time in order to raise their five children. Knowing the importance of education, they sent all five children to university in America with money they saved penny by penny. After years of struggling for a living in the US, the couple entrusted their five children to carry out their wish: to donate to primary education in poor, rural areas in China. Their children are now well-do-and lead much happier lives than did their parents, but they have never forgotten their parents’ wish. This is the origin of the Look Lowe Family Trust.

Through the Dao Xin Foundation in San Francisco, the family was introduced to the Amity Foundation in 1995. One hundred needy students (who had dropped out of school because of poverty) subsequently became beneficiaries of the Trust. In 1997, the family increased their support, helping 200 village dropouts (mostly children belonging to the Yi and Miao minorities in Zhaotong Prefecture of Yunnan Province) to return to school.

Following their first visit to Zhaotong in 1996, a Look Lowe Family Trust delegation (consisting of five family members) and two members of the Dao Xin Foundation once again crossed the Pacific in October 1998. They visited the Zhaotong children they had been sponsoring, bringing with them a variety of gifts they had prepared at home. The original plan was to visit beneficiaries in all five village schools. However, landslides and traffic interruptions on the way to Zhaishang and Huashan Townships limited the visit to only two schools in Shulin Township, 6 hours by jeep from Zhaotong City. The mountain roads were so bumpy and, at times, dangerous that the drivers had to stop their jeeps several times to allow the visitors some rest. Despite this, the visit proved successful and unforgettable.

During the visit, delegates saw for themselves that, in spite of the tough living and working conditions in these schools, there was no lack of dedication and conscientiousness on the part of the principals and teachers. The students obviously cherished very much the opportunity to return to school. Three sisters of the Look Lowe family placed on the heads of the children warm woolen hats they had personally knitted. They presented gifts that included globes, maps, dictionaries and Chinese literature books to both students and teachers. They kissed the shy and often dirty faces of the children. Elizabeth Huen, one of the sisters, insisted on walking uphill to the schools to see teachers and students despite her need to use a crutch. She encouraged students to dream big and study hard to realize their dreams. Trust delegates promised to continue sponsorship of the 200 students until their graduation from college.

Not knowing how to express their gratitude, the students’ parents brought as many eggs as they could gather from home, precious food which they ration even to their children, to present to these "respectable Chinese from overseas". Clasping their hands and shedding tears, all villagers, young and old, saw the visitors off by singing songs in their dialect. We could not understand the lyrics but the meaning was all too clear in the tearful eyes and warm farewell gestures of the villagers.

Yan Rong
Rural Development Division
Mind Stretching

Xuzhou’s First Privately-run Special Education School

Having been an educator all her life, retired middle-school teacher Han Rufeng thought, in 1986, that enrolling her six-year old grandson in school would be a pleasure. She was rudely shocked when school after school refused to accept him. She tried every school in Xuzhou City that provided specialized education but none would accept her grandson. The reason was simple: he had an IQ of 39. Schools only accepted children with IQs of 50 and above. At one school, the principal bluntly declared: “We will never accept someone like him!”

The harsh words left Han heartbroken and in tears. But they also spurred her into action. Convinced that the only course left was to set up a special school of her own, she enrolled in a two-year correspondence course on child psychology run by the China Institute of Science. When word got around that Han was planning to set up her own school for the mentally retarded, the feedback from education officials was even more devastating: “The city already has three public schools for special education and everyone is aware of the headaches involved. You mean you can do better?” Undaunted, Han went ahead to set up the first privately run special education school in Jiangsu Province in April 1989. Setting up the Pengcheng Special Education School for the Mentally Retarded in Xuzhou has taken a large chunk out of Han’s life savings. At the start, she spent 50 RMB a month to rent a 15 square meter room, borrowed a blackboard and some desks, set aside 80 RMB every month to hire two retired teachers and paid for all teaching aid and materials.

The first class had only five students with an average IQ of 22. Apart from her grandson, Han had to look through the registry of several hospitals and scour city streets to locate the others. Facing children with “super low IQs”, Han had to drastically modify her teaching methods. She had prepared herself psychologically but still, this was more than she had anticipated. She decided to focus on what she considers three closely related aspects: “drill, physiotherapy and instruction.” A doctor from the Xuzhou Chinese Medicine Hospital was invited to prescribe for the students herbal medicines aimed at soothing nerves. According to Han, his prescription, which is supposed to “calm shaking, soothe the nerves and make the mind clearer”, has had a positive effect on some students. After a year of devoted care and attention, Han and her colleagues saw the first fruits of their labor. Three of the students with IQs over 30 were able to learn a total of 200 Chinese characters. The other two could count up to ten and memorize around 50 characters.

The school has had to move three times

That was ten years ago. Today, the classroom has become a school. There are now more than 30 students, four teachers, three classrooms and additional teaching aid (but still extremely modest by Western standards.) The school has had to move three times and there are still difficulties in finding a suitable site. For visitors, locating the school, now renamed the Xuzhou Pengcheng Amity Special Education School for the Rehabilitation of the Mentally Retarded, is not an easy task. After arriving in Pengcheng, Xuzhou, which is a six-hour train ride away from Nanjing, it took other Amity staff and me another hour to reach the school. This is accessible only through a narrow side alley and a sloping pathway, which gets slippery on rainy days—not easy for disabled children to negotiate.

The school is located in an old, single-storey house with two large rooms that are used for the more advanced students and a small one used as a playroom for beginners. The rooms are clean, equipped with ceiling fans, simple tables and benches, but lighting and ventilation leaves much to be desired. Facilities are extremely limited and the equipment rudimentary. The school badly needs exercise facilities but right now only has a pole placed atop two stacks of books beside one of the doorways to serve as a bar for children to do knee bending exercises. Since the school has no garden or yard to speak of, students have to be led several blocks down the street to the borrowed grounds of a nearby public school for their weekly outdoor exercises and sports practice.

Han Rufeng, the school’s principal, is warm-hearted and effusive. Fired with an energy and enthusiasm that is remarkable for someone in her sixties, she’s obviously the dynamo that charges the school, its students and teachers. Her pride in her students’ achievements and their total trust in her are clearly
evident. Han’s first batch of students can now read books and newspapers. Higher level students can use Chinese dictionaries and write short essays. During my visit, Han’s grandson Hong Dian, now a tall 19-year old, was effortlessly reciting from Chinese classics. Three of the original batch of students have graduated and found jobs in the Xuzhou Communications Factory and another batch of three will reach the level of first year middle school. Over the last eight years, three students, whose IQ rose to 80 after some training, have been able to enter public schools. In addition to basic academic skills, students also learn daily living skills. During lunch break, older students take turns in helping to serve meals and do the dishes. Many can do simple housework, count money, do some basic shopping and even use public transportation. Some have won prizes in athletic meets for disabled children in Xuzhou.

School has given hope

Parents like Zhang Hou Xia are extremely grateful to Han and the school for the hope they have given them and their children. Her daughter, Luo Jie, was born with congenital defects. She had poor eyesight, her speech was slurred and her hands were always clenched. She could barely stand up straight. When she was old enough, Zhang enrolled her in a special school where a 3,000 RMB donation was required but it seemed a hopeless effort since Luo Jie would just dissolve in tears every time she was brought there. When Zhang heard about the special school in Pengcheng, she brought her child to Han Rufeng. Frustrated and desperate, Zhang told Han that she was willing to pay anything to have the child enrolled. She was moved to tears when Han unhesitatingly accepted the child without any mention of tuition fees. Since attending the school, Luo Jie’s speech has improved. She can walk steadily, use her hands and knows as many as 300 Chinese characters.

Working parents, like Guo Jian, are relieved that they can leave their children at the school with the full knowledge and assurance that they are in caring hands. According to Guo Jian, “Both my wife and I are working and we used to worry about where we could leave our mentally retarded child during the day. We were afraid that if we enrolled him in a regular school, he would be abused or bullied by other children. We have no worries about him when we leave him here.”

Fees at the Pencheng School are low, even by Chinese standards. Students only pay 385 RMB (US$ 48) per semester for the specialized tuition and care they receive. Despite this, many of the students who come from very poor families cannot afford to pay. For example, this semester, 19 children out of 35 children in the School are under the sponsorship of the orphan whose grandmother is crippled and whose grandfather is seriously ill. The school can afford to charge low fees or waive them for those in need only because of the financial support from the Amity Foundation. In addition to an annual grant since 1991, Amity has given much needed encouragement and moral support to Han and her school.

Most children in the Pencheng School are from extremely poor families who cannot afford the fees in public special education schools or have Iqs below levels acceptable in these schools. Many of them used to be locked at home or left on the streets. Han has been able to bring them to the school only after door-to-door visits in the community. Her commitment and dedication reflects her concern for mentally retarded children like her own grandson. She is determined to show that these children can be nurtured to live independent lives and contribute to society if proper education is provided.

Inspired by the warmth and concern of Amity staff and the good work that Amity does, Han became a Christian in 1994 and worships at a house meeting point. She has now placed her school under the administrative supervision of the local Xuzhou Christian Council. The church in Xuzhou provides small donations to the school and members of the congregation pay regular visits.

Students at the Pencheng Special Education School

Despite her already enormous achievements under extremely difficult conditions, Han drives relentlessly to improve her school. In recent months, she has been attending courses on how to deal with children with cerebral palsy and has many ideas about how to help these children. However, the school desperately needs more financial assistance. It needs to relocate to a more suitable site, acquire more equipment and provide better facilities for its students. So far, although her school is providing a vital service for mentally impaired children in the area, Han has received virtually no help from the government and can expect very little, if any, in the future. Like many small privately run specialized schools for the disabled that are slowly emerging in many parts of China, the school has to tap private sources or overseas aid for financial support. Without Amity’s support, the school would not have continued to exist.
Meeting China’s New Challenges

Amity Gears Up

This article is an excerpt from a longer speech delivered by Zhang Liwei, Assistant to the General Secretary of the Amity Foundation, at the European Network of Amity Partners (ENAP) 1998 meeting held in Zurich, Switzerland in November 1998.

The most serious problems facing China today are population, poverty, unemployment and corruption. China’s population of 1.2 billion constitutes 22% of the world’s population and yet its share of the world’s arable land is only 7%. This means that the yearly population increase of 12 million puts a heavy burden on Chinese society. The population explosion and the enormous consumption of natural resources it implies poses a great threat to the earth’s environment. The expanding population has led to the reclamation of land from forests and the cutting down of trees for income and firewood. As a result, China is facing severe ecological problems. Heavy deforestation has caused soil erosion and the silting of riverbeds, which have resulted in extensive flooding. Natural disasters due to flooding have more than doubled since the 1950s. A lack of greeneries means that six of China’s cities are listed among the ten most polluted in the world.

With pollution on the rise, the number of people affected by respiratory diseases has increased dramatically. Only 11 out of 90 major cities in China have air quality that meets the national standard. In Beijing, 4.2% of middle school students are suffering from bronchitis. In badly polluted areas, 23 persons out of every 100,000 die from lung cancer.

Living standards in the rural areas have greatly improved as a result of economic reforms but the rural-urban gap is widening. So is the gap between the eastern and western parts of China. Most of the 50 million people living below the poverty line are in west China. The relative poverty of rural areas has led to migrant workers flooding into cities to find jobs. It is estimated that the excess labor force in the countryside is about 160 million. Most of these laborers spend three months on the farm, one month celebrating the Spring festival and eight months doing nothing. Their mass migration into cities has created new problems such as overcrowding and rising crime rates.

Poverty in the rural areas has been accompanied by a weak health care system. In September 1998, it was reported there were 11,170 persons confirmed with HIV. The real figure may be closer to 300,000. Most of those infected live in the countryside. AIDS cases have increased rapidly in China since 1985, when the first Aids victim was discovered. Medical experts predict that HIV cases will reach the one million mark by the year 2000. Heterosexual contact is believed to be the leading cause. Practices such as prostitution and the keeping of mistresses are spreading across the country. Intravenous drug use is the second major cause. China’s Aids prevention program, made public in 1998, will try to keep the figure down to 1.5 million cases in the next 12 years. There will be a drive to raise public awareness, crack down on drug users and fully screen blood donations.

Apart from rural poverty, China is now confronted with urban poverty. As a result of reforms being carried out in state-owned enterprises, the number of unemployed in the cities will reach a total of 50 million in 1999. This army of unemployed does not include a “floating population” of 120 million and about 160 million jobless rural residents. At the moment, the government is providing an average monthly subsidy of 77 RMB (roughly US$10) to laid-off workers in the cities. Unemployment has led to social problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse, family violence, divorce and prostitution.

The latest victims of China’s changing economy are millions of Chinese women age 35 or older. Older women are the most likely to be poorly educated, the most likely to be laid off, and the least likely to be re-employed. In 1997, women made up 61% of the unemployed although they constituted only 39% of the work force. Of these women 75% are still seeking jobs compared to 50% of their male counterparts. Despite years of working in textile mills or chemical plants, most of these unemployed women do not have technical skills or adequate education. They now have fewer opportunities for employment. The Women’s Federation and the government have had some success in retraining some of these women for new jobs but this has reinforced stereotypes about women’s work since they are being trained to be beauticians, seamstresses and domestic helpers.
Maintaining quality in the midst of expansion

The problem of poverty is the most significant in China and Amity’s efforts will still focus on poverty issues both in the countryside and in the cities. We will continue to attach great importance to rural development projects and health care training programs so that the people at the grassroots level will benefit. How does Amity maintain the quality of its work when its activities are expanding all the time?

There are two aspects to this. On the one hand, we rely on our local partners and project offices out in the field. On the other, we try to improve the quality of Amity staff. We will continue to have a program of staff development in which we send our staff overseas for study and training. This is still the most effective way to train our staff. Last year, for instance, we sent Liu Ruhong (Director of the Amity Teachers’ Program) to Selly Oak in Birmingham to study English, TESOL and development subjects. Her English has greatly improved and her understanding of English teaching has deepened. If the support for a semester study is approved by the Norwegian Missionary Alliance, we will send Wu An’an to Selly Oak for a course on development. We also encourage our staff to undergo in-service training at Chinese universities. At the moment, Zhuang Ailing, Director of the Blindness Prevention Division, is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the Department of Sociology of Nanjing University. Yu Qun, staff in charge of publicity, is studying for an MA in mass media and journalism at Nanjing University. Tong Su, a staff member of the Teachers Program, is studying for an MA in higher education at the Higher Education Research Institute. She Hongyu of the Blindness Prevention Division is doing a BA degree in English. Amity will continue with this “two-legged” policy and encourage its staff to do in-service training in their related areas of work as a means towards greater professionalism and specialization. The quality of the staff is a commitment to the quality of Amity’s work.

Canadian Aid Project: Off To A Start

The Canada-China Integrated Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Project has recently been launched in China with the participation of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MOFTEC), the Agriculture Ministry (MOA) and the Amity Foundation. The massive poverty alleviation project will be implemented over a five year period in Ningxia, Gansu, Shanxi and Guizhou, four of the poorest provinces and regions in China. The project is being funded by the Canadian and Chinese governments and MCC to the tune of C$11,610,000 or roughly 65,000,000 RMB.

Recognizing that the causes of absolute poverty and household food security are multi-dimensional, the project will take an integrated approach and work towards four inter-related areas of implementation:

- increased agricultural production and ecological sustainability, through improved soil and water conservation measures and land use management practices;
- improved basic health care services, nutrition and sanitation of the targeted poor, particularly of women and children;
- increased access to basic education for children, and adult non-formal training in functional literacy/numeracy, practical skills and income generation; and
- increased economic diversification and income earning opportunities, especially for women in targeted poor communities.

Using a participatory approach, specific activities to be carried out will depend on the particular needs, capacities, and local priorities of the respective provinces and counties included in the project. For example in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, initial work has included the provision of irrigation and drinking water in the counties of Tong Xin and Hai Yuan. In Gansu Province, plans are being developed to provide micro-credit services to small businesses. Capacity building at all levels (that is, provincial, county, township, and village) will also be emphasized.

MCC is the relief and development arm of the Mennonite church. It has been one of Amity’s partners since the foundation’s inception and has been a staunch supporter of the Teachers Program. In recent years, involvement has expanded to Amity’s rural development work. When CIDA requested that MCC select a Chinese partner during the preparations leading up to this particular project, MCC chose Amity, indicating that Amity’s involvement would be a precondition to their own participation. By acting as the Project Coordination Office, Amity is assisting with planning and project management responsibilities and hopes to ensure smooth implementation.
When East meets West

For the second time in four years the Amity Foundation held its annual winter conference for foreign teachers in the city of Kunming in China’s southern province of Yunnan. Such a venue allowed an additional opportunity for conference participants to visit remote mountain villages and witness first-hand the results of successful Amity projects. This year’s visit included drinking water and irrigation projects, a bio-gas project, improved terrace farming procedures and a medical clinic.

As with all Amity social and medical projects, the participation and contribution from the people themselves for whom the projects are to serve are important. The community itself is asked to contribute as much as it is able both financially and through labor in the construction of the projects. It is a process of human and community development. Much consideration is given to both the project and its place in the community.

The visits provided a rare occasion for foreign teachers to visit these areas of social development all carried out in remote mountain villages where poverty and isolation are constant factors. Conference members were eager to participate. I was among those in the small buses which carried teachers and other conference participants far into the mountains over rough, narrow roads. Spectacular scenery among seemingly endless mountains stretched before us and into the distance.

Reaching the villages, we were greeted with choruses of welcome and, in one case, Christian hymns sung in the local language by the villagers themselves. Blankets of fresh pine needles were spread in a tender preparation of welcome. Speeches accompanied with food and drink provided by villagers dressed in bright traditional clothing gave the whole event a festive air. Smiles and conversation came easily.

Most of us took advantage of the photo opportunities. Obviously such could be used for reflection and presentation when we returned to our home countries. However, for me, the most poignant moment came later when we stopped at the small medical clinic set up as part of an Amity project to serve people in a wide area for whom there were no previous medical services. Here, there was no music to greet us, there were no villagers in colorful clothing and few cameras were in evidence. The clinic was a small, simple building with the one female and one male doctor shyly attempting to answer the questions presented. There was little more.

There, in the presence of those obviously dedicated doctors, I thought about what went on in those places, after we, the visitors had left. Life would simply continue. The daily walks to check the newly laid water lines would go on. The problems of dealing with the distribution of water would continue. Peasant farmers would return to their work in the fields. The doctors would continue to serve as best they could whomever appeared at their door.

Certainly it was good to celebrate, to come together in the fellowship of the moment. The music, the eating together and the being of one with another if only for a few hours in the same place was all as it should have been. It was an opportunity for East to meet West in this way. I am sure that many hold their own private and personal memories of the day.

However, although we as the foreign guests may have physically removed ourselves from the presence of those people and those places, we cannot forget. Life for those people and for ourselves continues. In any true human contact we cannot simply give or take and then walk away. We cannot simply visit, take our photographs and then forget.

Even at this very moment there are those who carry out their lives in those same mountains. For the ones fortunate enough to be able to take advantage of the projects, life may be better but it is still not easy. The factors of isolation and poverty are complex. And there are still others waiting for a helping hand. As we reflect on all of this, gaze at the photos taken and remember the work done, we must also know that the task continually lies before us. There was a visit to these mountains, yet more waits to be done.

Now comes also the task of telling others what we have seen, the sharing of the personal stories, and the making of the whole thing a reality to those who were not with us on the visit. We are the ones who were there. May we remind others and may we remind ourselves.

Gary MacDonald
"Our good old *Manba*! is how grateful Tibetan nomads affectionately refer to the mobile surgical clinic that has relieved them of so much pain and suffering in the last two years. Run by the Qinghai People’s Provincial Hospital, the clinic on wheels was donated by Amity in 1997.* With equipment worth 3.5 million RMB, it has facilities for various kinds of surgery including operations related to the eye, bone (orthopedics) and women’s diseases. Temperature in the mobile clinic is automatically adjustable so that surgery can be performed in both cold and warm weather. The clinic also has x-ray facilities that can produce results in minutes. Accompanying the mobile surgical clinic during its rounds in the prairies are two vehicles used to transport medical personnel and modern communication facilities. The whole convoy is virtually a hospital on wheels.

Gong Bao Chai Dan, the Qinghai Provincial Hospital’s vice-director, oversees the entire operation with a special team composed of the hospital’s leading specialists. Over the past year, the hospital has sent specialist teams to the two Tibetan Autonomous areas of Hwang Nan and Hai Nan as well as to areas inhabited by the Tu nationality. Surgeons travelling with this modern mobile clinic have already treated more than 3,000 people and performed over 430 operations, saving for its beneficiaries more than 3 million RMB in travel and medical expenses. At the same time, in the process of treating the masses, leading specialists from the province’s best hospitals have helped to raise the level of medical care and knowledge at the county and township levels through their interaction with local medical personnel.

The clinic has traversed thousands of kilometers, bringing great joy to the people. Recently, the mobile surgical team visited the Jiang Xi Kou township in Gong He county, a part of the Hai Nan Tibetan Nationality Autonomous District, and carried out three full days of surgery. Now, at least seven more nomads who underwent cataract operations can once again enjoy the sight of blue skies and green pastures! Along with the heads of various hospital units, the hospital director himself has participated in these outreach missions. All those who travel with the clinic have to live simply and often have to sleep in mud houses and tents belonging to nomads. This has truly touched the hearts of the people at the grassroots.

*(The mobile surgical clinic was a donation from the China Connection based in California. The specially designed and equipped vehicle was shipped to China in 1997. The CWM/Nethersole Fund in Hong Kong donated about one million RMB in 1998 for additional medical equipment. See the article “Mobile surgical clinic reaches Qinghai’s prairies” in Amity Newsletter issue No.43, 4/1997, p. 8.)*
Nursing care training for unemployed women

With the twin targets of meeting the need for adequate nursing care and providing employment to a growing pool of retrenched women workers, a consultation was convened by the Medical Division of the Amity Foundation on January 29th, 1999 to discuss details of a special nursing care training program. Top representatives from all 18 hospitals in Nanjing City and its vicinity were present at the consultation together with members of the Gulou District Labor Bureau, Nanjing City’s Health Bureau, the Nanjing Nurses Association and the city’s Labor Training Center.

In discussions, special attention was paid to problems arising from the employment of nursing care providers and how to resolve them. Nursing care in Nanjing hospitals has been highly inadequate because on the one hand there is a rising demand for nursing care givers that has not been fully met and on the other hand, most care givers do not provide quality care having never undergone any kind of specialized training. The consultation also discussed in greater depth the implementation of this year’s plan for nursing care training in terms of its phases, the number to be trained and contents of the training program. According to plans, over the next three years, Amity’s Medical Division will provide free skills training to 4,000 retrenched women workers between the ages of 35 and 50. Its main aim is to train enough nursing care givers for Nanjing hospitals with an inpatient capacity of over 500 beds. To ensure success of the program, Amity has made special efforts to adapt the training to felt needs through extensive and regular consultation with all units involved.

Teachers meet in Kunming

The Amity Foundation held its annual winter conference for Amity teachers in the southwestern city of Kunming from January 26 to February 2, 1999. As usual, the conference provided teachers with a chance to catch up with friends, share information and ideas related to teaching issues, and to worship together. There were also opportunities to hear from Amity staff about recent developments in China and Amity’s projects, from State Foreign Expert Bureau staff about foreign teachers in China, and from local church leaders about the situation of the church in Yunnan. One additional highlight this year was an opportunity to not only worship in a local church, but hear a Miao nationality choir at the service there.

This year’s conference was also special in that it included a two-day visit to Amity-sponsored rural development projects in Wuding county, a mountainous area several hours from Kunming. Teachers visited several remote Miao villages to see rural clinics, a village cultural center and a variety of projects to improve the local water, food and energy supplies.

The Amity Foundation was created at the initiative of Chinese Christian 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.

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