The "Third Revolution": Migrant Workers In Changing China

The Amity Foundation is presently providing support to schools for children of migrant workers. It also supports the re-training of retrenched women workers in Nanjing and Wuxi, Jiangsu Province. Katrin Fiedler attended the Amity-sponsored conference on "Migrant Workers: Phenomenon, Tendencies and Policies" in Beijing in March 2002 and provides a brief summary of conference proceedings below.

"We make them study objects of our field research - but do we really know what they feel?" In his opening address, Li Shenming, Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), reminded his audience of the difficulties of understanding the life of China's migrant workers.

On March 21-22, 2002, an Amity-sponsored conference on "Migrant Workers: Phenomenon, Tendencies And Policies" was held in Beijing. The meeting, co-organized by Amity and the Institute of Sociology of CASS, brought together around thirty Chinese scholars for an assessment of the situation of China's migrant population. It is estimated that around 100 million peasants have left their villages in search of jobs in cities. As new residents, and without official urban household registration, they lack access to basic facilities such as medical care, education, social insurance and housing.

Why did Amity initiate this conference? In his opening remarks, Zhang Liwei, Assistant to the General Secretary, explained Amity's interest in expanding those projects serving and relating to China's migrant population. Amity's work over the past seventeen years has closely mirrored China's development. When the economy in China's eastern provinces...
started to take off, Amity moved west in its project work. Now, following the
tide of migrant workers in search of
jobs in the cities, Amity needs to ad-

dress this new form of urban poverty.
Making a living from menial tasks re-

dected by ordinary urban residents,
but without access to basic services,
many migrants feel discriminated
against. On a more personal note,
Zhang told the audience about essays
written by migrant workers’ children.
“When I read some of these stories,
full of reproach about the neglect the
children had suffered, I realized the
seeds of hatred have already been sown.”

Despite the potentially unsettling
force of this social situation, the gov-

ernment has been slow in respond-
ing to migrants’ needs. On the other
hand, more and more NGOs and vol-
unteers seem to be stepping in, a
trend that is difficult to quantify but
not to be overlooked.

Seventeen papers were presented in
just two days—ample evidence of the
increasing attention China’s migrant
population is receiving from scholars.
Presentations covered a wide range
of topics, from theoretical discussions
over motivations for migration to in-
dividual case studies of migrant com-

munities in the cities. While school-
ing for migrant children has received
increasing attention over the past
years, migrants’ access to medical
care remains an underresearched

area.

The phenomenon of
migration is a manifold
one, and participants
pointed out the need for
terminological
precision: apart from
migrants of rural origins,
workers and profession-
als are now job-hopping
between cities. As such,
not all migrants are poor
and in need of support. For Amity,
workers of peasant origin who lack
urban household registration, are of
particular interest.

Most papers delivered were of a de-
scriptive nature and presented an
array of new facts and interesting
observations. For example, urban
communities of migrant workers mir-
ror their former village life in many
ways, such as in decision-making pro-
ces or ancestor veneration. Re-
garding the origins of those who de-
cide to migrate to the cities, it is im-
portant to note that they do not con-
stitute the poorest of the poor. In
general, inhabitants from China’s most poverty-stricken areas would be
unable to finance a trip to the city.
Also, in recent years, more and more
women are leaving their villages.
Another new development is the in-
creasing number of migrants who
bring their families to the cities and
who do not intend to return to the
countryside.

The policy implications of these find-
ings remained somewhat vague. Should migrants be encouraged to
return to their villages? How can
housing and other services be pro-
vided in China’s rapidly changing ur-
ban landscape? Should city planners
segemte migrants according to their
ethnic background? There are also
effects of migration that are hard to
measure: What is the social cost of
deserted villages and disrupted
families? How does one evaluate the
changes in traditional family struc-
tures and gender roles that result
from migration?

What is happening is indeed a “third
revolution in the village” (after the
land reform of the 1950s and the in-
troduction of the household respons-
sibility system in the 1980s) and we
are only beginning to understand its
implications. For policy decisions re-
garding Amity’s work, more follow-
up needs to be done based on re-
search presented at the conference.
Finding solutions will not be easy.
“How do we solve these problems?”
Li Lulu from Beijing People’s Univer-
sity asked rhetorically at the con-
ference. “I don’t know” he
concluded.
Moving Into The 21st Century: 
Notes on Amity’s Concerns and Direction 

Ting Yenren

Stephen Ting Yenren is the Vice President of Amity Foundation. The speech below was delivered at a meeting with some of Amity’s overseas partners during the Amity Teachers Conference in Kunming, Yunnan Province, in January 2002.

During the first decade of the 21st century, Amity will continue to stand with the Chinese people and work hard to improve the quality of life. At the same time, however, as the situation in China changes, we are faced with new problems and new challenges. This requires us to constantly study the changing situation and new problems and to readjust the focus of our work. One direction we will take is to empower the urban poor, especially migrant workers, laid-off workers and their families.

Amity was founded in 1985. Over the past 16 years, there has been tremendous growth in our understanding of our work in China. We have experienced two phases of understanding, and now it appears we are at the threshold of the third.

When we began, we were not very different from an old-fashioned church charitable organization, with little knowledge of how to conduct development work in China. In a way, this reflected the fact that up to that point, every aspect of social welfare work was in the hands of the government and the public viewed it as the sole responsibility of the government. It also reflected the fact that the church had regarded social concerns as irrelevant to its work and stayed aloof from the practical concerns of most people in China. Coming out of this old tradition, we were faced with the issue of whether or not to have such an organization as Amity. We had to go all out to initiate the discussion over “Why Amity?” with church leaders, government officials, and friends overseas. This was Phase One of our understanding, the “Why Amity?” phase.

As we entered the 1990s, Christian participation in social development seemed to have been broadly accepted. We had carried out many successful small projects in eastern China, especially in northern Jiangsu Province, which we proudly showed to visitors and used as examples to convince people that we were indeed able to run projects. However, at the same time, as China’s reforms progressed, we were burdened by the widening gap between the fast-growing eastern seaboard and the struggling western interior. We felt a calling to move west. And we did. This was Phase Two of our understanding, the “Going west” phase.

At this stage, we also came across many difficulties. Going west meant we were entering areas where there are very few Chinese Christians and we would have to cooperate solely with government agencies. There were objections from within the church that we would be too close to the government. As for government agencies, some were unwilling to see us move resources to the western part of the country. Others were afraid that they could be held responsible if we did anything wrong in western China. Still others raised familiar suspicions about our motives.

Throughout the 1990s, Amity carried out many large-scale integrated development projects in the western part of China, and these projects greatly affected the lives of local people and helped ease poverty in certain areas. However, even while we were working with local people in fighting poverty in western China, we began to see emerging problems in urban areas. Workers were being laid-off and could no longer feed their families. Migrants were forced to work under hazardous conditions for meager incomes. It looks as if we are at the threshold of Phrase Three in our understanding of our work in China.

It is impossible for us to turn a blind eye to the problems of urban poverty, labor abuse, and the dodging of responsibilities by companies in work-related accidents. We would like to
help protect the rights of laid-off workers, migrant workers and their children, and help lift them out of poverty. Therefore, in the years to come, we will likely continue going west while paying close attention to urban issues, to people adversely affected by economic development.

However, working in urban areas is very different in nature from working in rural development. The urban poor are physically close to the legal, medical, educational facilities to which they have been denied access. The problems have to do with systems and policies, and Amity does not have any experience in handling these problems. We have a saying in the office: "We know how to deal with poverty that has resulted from the lack of development, but do not know much about how to deal with poverty that happens alongside development." It will take some time for us to learn how to approach these new problems, but we are compelled not to turn a blind eye to them.

There are already concerns from within Amity that we may get into certain sensitive issues, that we may be seen as being political, and that we may move further ahead without the support of our traditional constituency. Many of these are legitimate concerns that should be taken into account while we make our decisions. For instance, most Chinese Christians do not perceive social service and development work as being integral to their faith and therefore, it was a big step over the years for them to support Amity’s work. As Amity considers moving ahead, we are faced with the choice of either moving ahead without these grassroots Christians or waiting for them to come along without moving ahead first.

At each phase of our understanding, we have received good advice from friends both inside and outside of China. At present, we would also appreciate the help and support our friends can give us.

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**Borrowing Money, Keeping Self-Esteem:**

*Micro-credit programme in Yanchi*

Katrin Fiedler had the opportunity to see first-hand the struggle of villagers against desertification in northern China recently. She writes, below, about Amity's Rural Development Division’s project in Yanchi, Ningxia.

"Before I joined Amity’s micro-credit programme and started raising sheep, I had to make a living from the soil,” Du Shizheng from Yanchi in southeastern Ningxia remembers. With eight *mu* of land per capita [1 *mu* = 0.06 ha] and a population density of 21 persons per square kilometre, Yanchi sounds like a Chinese farmer’s paradise. However, further facts soon reveal that it is indeed far from paradise. Poor saline soils and in particular a severe lack of water result in grain crops of only 45 kg per *mu*. By comparison, farmers in other areas of China may only have one *mu* of land per capita, but can harvest several hundred kilos of grain a year, especially where two harvests are possible. In fact, the "land" Yanchi's peasants live on might by stricter standards be classified as desert. And Yanchi's inhabitants are consequently poor. With an annual per capita income of 560 RMB, Yanchi is well below the national poverty line of 625 RMB [US$ 80] per person a year. Without the capital to engage in other, more profitable forms of agriculture, Du and her fellow villagers had to continue a vicious circle of unsustainable land usage, ecological degradation and low incomes.

Paradise lost

Ningxia was not always the barren piece of land it is today. Centuries ago, culture and economy flourished in what was then the legendary West Xia kingdom. But unsustainable land usage in an ecologically fragile system has led to severe desertification, and today's people are paying the price. Under such conditions, long term economic development is only possible if it is ecologically sustainable. In Yanchi, Amity tries to address these needs through an integrated development approach.

The Desertified Land Integrated Management and Integrated Community Development Project is composed of four different elements: environmental upgrading, the improvement of
production facilities, capacity building among those involved in the project, and a micro-credit programme. For example, newly erected grassland enclosures protect scarce vegetation against overgrazing, and afforestation with drought-resistant plants helps prevent further desertification. Better access to water for drinking and irrigation improves production facilities. Finally, credit enables villagers to engage in alternative modes of land usage that are both more profitable and less environmentally damaging.

All project components are mutually supportive but, talking with Amity’s local partners from the county project office, it soon becomes clear that the micro-credit programme produces the most visible and astounding results. For Du Shizheng, 44, the micro-credit project has been particularly successful. After the wedding of her son, the family was left without a single head of cattle. With her first loan, Du and her husband bought on credit 27 lambs, and when they sold them half a year later, they made 70 RMB profit per sheep. Today, the sheep business has made Du the success story of her village, and she is hatching big plans for the future: a well and a hothouse tent are to follow soon.

One major rationale behind micro-credit projects is the fact that ordinary peasants would never be able to get a loan, however small, from a bank. What bank would take a plot of desert land as security? For an individual family, micro-credit opens the door to a small enterprise like raising cattle or building a hothouse tent, undertakings for which otherwise there would be no money. On a larger scale, micro-credit projects, with their sudden influx of capital, can help boost the local economy.

**An act of empowerment**

One important element of micro-credit projects is the fact that the primary beneficiaries are women. The responsibility for devising and implementing a small project of their own increases their self-esteem, and the fact that women suddenly contribute in a significant way to the family income raises their position within the community. From a creditor’s perspective, women’s greater reliability in repaying loans is an important argument for aiming micro-credit projects specifically at women. Another consideration in the Chinese context is the fact that women are less inclined to migrate to the cities for work.

Women wishing to participate in Amity’s micro-credit programme form small support groups. In regular meetings villagers share experiences, and the resulting network also helps to ensure that everybody strives hard to pay the loan back. “Material on chicken raising and pig breeding was read to the participants,” the minutes of one such meeting in Jing’gou Vil-

lace reveal. Not all women do equally well. In general, those with basic reading skills fare much better, because they can consult reference materials when they encounter trouble in their new business.

Candidates for a loan need to have basic knowledge about rural production and marketing. They then are required to come up with a simple plan for the enterprise they wish to borrow the money for. The first amount women can borrow is 1000 RMB, with payment due six months later. Through consecutive rounds of borrowing and returning money, the women can gradually increase the capital they invest in their small project. In later stages of the programme, those with a positive borrowing record can borrow up to 2000 RMB per round. “When we distributed the first loan, some women did not know how to count 1000 RMB,” He Yujiao from Amity’s Rural Development Division remembers. “This is all one big act of empowerment.”

**Backbone of the local economy**

Today, women have become the backbone of economic development in these villages. Stories like Du’s inspire, and more and more women are joining the programme. “I will join in the next round of borrowing,” 25-year-old Liu Wenli proudly announces. “I want to start the first small shop in our village.” “I saw other people who participated in the programme, and how they suddenly earned a lot of money,” explains another woman. But all participants agree that the project’s most important effect is not the increase in income, but the accompanying change in attitude. Some of the women now are also learning
to read and to write, encouraged by the successful example of the first few who dared to join a literacy class.

Micro-credit projects are capital and work intensive. In Yanchi, around one million RMB are currently circulating in micro-loans of around 1000 RMB, and every single case requires careful administration and follow-up. "The micro-credit programme makes up 80% of our current workload," estimates Director Long Zhipu, head of the county project office. But the time and money are well invested. Apart from their income-generating results, micro-credit programmes are notable for their strong effects on personal motivation. This is also true in the case of Yanchi. For all parties involved, the surge in enthusiasm and mutual support, as well as a new willingness to engage in further projects of their own, is the most remarkable result of the micro-credit programme. In Yanchi, local women even jointly created a New Year's parade which took them to the county town and won a lot of praise. Three years ago, many of these women hardly dared to speak with outsiders visiting their village, let alone present themselves in a programme in public.

A 'developing project'

With its strong motivational effects, the micro-credit programme adds a further dimension of sustainability to the overall project. "Our work can only be continuous if we focus on human development, because [material] resources will always be limited," explains Long. "This is a 'developing project'. Our aim is not only to attain ecological sustainability, but also sustainability within the project." One remarkable result of this philosophy is the newly established "Association for the Development of the Mountainous Region of Southern Ningxia". Long and his colleagues hope the association will provide them with a framework to continue the development work started in cooperation with Amity. With a three-year project phase successfully completed, Amity's involvement in Yanchi may be temporary, but there is no doubt the project will be sustained for a long time to come. Much remains for the new local NGO to do. There is still a long way to go before the Ningxia paradise can be regained.

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**Interviewing Amity's Partners**

Over the last 17 years, Amity has worked with a large number of overseas partners, many of whom have supported Amity's wide range of projects since its inception in 1985. At the Teachers Conference in Kunming in February 2002, Theresa Carino took the opportunity to interview representatives from one of Amity's oldest partners.

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**Peter Demberger** is the Secretary for Asia of the VEM (United Evangelical Mission in Germany). A former pastor from Wuppertal, Germany, he taught in a college in North Sumatra, Indonesia, between 1973 and 1981, lecturing on the New Testament. He subsequently assumed the position of Asia Secretary with VEM in Wuppertal. Then a German organization, VEM has been internationalized and is now a community of churches in three continents—Asia, Africa and Europe.

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**Why have you concentrated on working with Amity in China?**

VEM has a long history of working in China. The Rhenish Mission sent missionaries to Canton Province (now known as Guangdong Province) as early as 1847. When China opened up in the 1980s for cooperation with Christians overseas, VEM was one of the first to respond positively and accept the new shape of Christianity in China as represented by the post-denominational China Christian Council (CCC) in 1985.

The idea of having Amity Foundation, a church-related organization contributing to China's development, as an expression of Christianity in a non-colonial setting, with self-determination by the Chinese church, is a concept that congregations in Germany are familiar with. (The Three-Self Principle is also practiced by Christians in Indonesia—they are self-reliant with respect to finances, theology and evangelization.) The sending of personnel from Germany is done only under the auspices of local
leaders. In this sense, mission personnel cooperate and serve but are not the decision-makers.

I am very impressed by Amity's work, by its cooperation with the government and the local people as the principle in implementing projects. Amity is very innovative and pioneering, for example, in its decision to "go West", in its contributions to AIDS Education in China, in its "Back to School" projects and in the re-training of laid-off women workers.

I have seldom found, elsewhere, such dedicated and highly motivated staff and local project partners in the provinces.

How has VEM's partnership with Amity evolved over the years?

Support for the teachers program is the main thrust of VEM's work in China. In the past, the teachers we supported used to be all Germans, but this is no longer emphasized. VEM not only recruits English teachers from Europe, but also from Asian countries such as the Philippines. At the moment, there are three teachers in the program: two Filipinos and one Austrian. These teachers are selected by member churches that include the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. As is the case with all other partner agencies, we are only one of three sources of funding for the teachers—VEM, Amity and the local Chinese college where they teach.

VEM's partnership with Amity dates back to 1985, the year when the Amity Foundation was established. Claudia and Gotthard Oblau were the first Amity teachers sent by VEM and we have continued to support Amity teachers ever since. Under the Teachers Program, teachers are expected to give feedback to congregations at home. All are committed Christians and are members of local congregations. Besides their teaching experience, they are expected to share their observations and reflections about Christianity in China through regular communications and an annual report. VEM expects teachers to be "multipliers" of their experience in China, to help VEM understand China and Chinese Christians better and to be critical of the news we normally get from media (which is often a one-sided view of China).

What are VEM's other projects with Amity?

VEM supports retraining programs for laid-off women workers in Wuxi in Jiangsu Province. The AIDS Education Project 2001 in Yunnan Province is also supported by VEM especially since member churches have identified this as a common priority in Asia and Africa.

Two former Amity teachers and staff of the Amity Hong Kong Office have built up a network of "friends of China" in the Northern Rhine area in Westphalia, Germany. There is also a China information service sponsored by most of the missions under the roof of EMW which monitors and documents events in China and gives special attention to the Church and theological developments in China. VEM helps to support this work.

VEM has supported the Amity Hong Kong Office since 1985 and has enabled it to acquire its own office space. VEM also provides support through EMW for Amity. This includes personnel who are Amity teachers or Hong Kong Office staff.

What do you think are the new challenges facing Amity?

Amity is doing what the church as a whole should be doing — in terms of diaconal fields. As long as the churches are where they are, Amity is much needed as an instrument of the churches to witness to God's love in a special context in a special way.

I wish we in Germany can do more in China—beyond the limitations we face—financially, in the field of personnel and even politically.

In VEM, it is the member churches that will decide whether to further engage in China work. The CCC is not yet a member church of VEM, so the interest in China could wane. My hope for the future is that the partnership of churches in Germany with the churches in China will be more rooted in grassroots congregations.
Affected provinces:

Shaanxi, Sichuan, Hubei, Chongqing, Ningxia, Gansu, Xinjiang, Guizhou, Guangxi, Fujian, Zhejiang, Hunan, Anhui, Jiangxi, Jiangsu, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi and Hebei are among the affected provinces/municipalities. The worst and repeatedly affected provinces/municipalities presently include Shaanxi, Sichuan, Chongqing, Hubei, Guangxi, Guizhou, Jiangxi, Ningxia and Gansu.

From 6th-25th June 2002, violent rainstorms hit the central and western parts of China, bringing disaster to 14 provinces and municipalities (which account for two thirds of the country's total area). The rainstorms have caused devastating floods and land/mud slides in many affected central and western areas. Towns, villages, crops, roads, houses, schools, water conservation facilities, and dozens of cities in the vast western areas, were submerged under water. Large numbers of casualties, injuries and destruction have occurred. Hundreds of thousands of people have been made homeless. Roads, communications, water and power supply facilities were severely damaged and even totally paralysed in some of the worst hit counties. According to meteorological experts, the violent rains will continue for some time in to the summer.

The violent rainfalls and the ensuing serious flooding and extensive landslides have had a tremendous impact on human life. Homeless and evacuated people are having the most difficult time. They are facing serious challenges as regards food and other basic life necessities. Many of them have difficulty locating proper shelter. At this midsummer time, they are often exposed either to scorching sun or to cold rains. They are plagued by mosquito bites all night. And they lack quilts and blankets against cold nights. Loss and damage of crops will induce a shortage of rice for victims for the coming four to six months. Much of the infrastructure and schools will be left un-reconstructed and un-repaired for years to come. Agricultural activities will suffer severe setbacks. School-aged children will have to stay in make-shift classrooms or crowd into villagers' houses for classes for several years to come.

Amity's response

Amity will focus its relief efforts in two of the hardest hit counties: Ningshan County in Shanxi Province and Jialing County in Sichuan Province. It will try to meet some of the basic needs of 5,000 homeless people in these counties. To fulfil the planned programs, a total of 4,146,250 RMB (= US$ 501,966 approx.) is needed for food, mosquito nets, cotton quilts, and materials for house repairs. Distribution of food, rice, drinking water, salt, clothing, quilts, mosquito nets, plastic sheeting and kerosene to the worst affected victims is in progress. Meanwhile, crop seeds and fertilizer are being transported to parts of the affected areas, especially in the south eastern regions, for rush planting.

For further information please visit the Amity Foundation website (English version) at www.amityfoundation.org or contact Ms. Shao Ping Ping at The Amity Foundation, 71 Han Kou Road, Nanjing 210008, China. Tel: (86-25) 331-7034; Fax: (86-25) 662-1701, Email: afn71@public1.ptt.js.cn

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