**Escaping Poverty:**
**A Chicken-And-Egg Case**

*Katrin Fiedler*

Sitting in front of his new VCD player and TV set, farmer Wei Erfu beams at his visitors as he motions them to sit down. With a strong winter wind still sweeping through the empty Inner Mongolian countryside outside in March, the allure of watching TV on long evenings becomes immediately understandable. In the courtyard, chickens wander around a shiny new motorbike that contrasts starkly with the mud house that is Wei’s home. Still, the chickens and the motorbike belong together, as it was the chickens that brought Wei’s wealth.

Wei’s family is one of 156 households that are members of the Mountain Chicken Association in Aobaoliang Township, Dalate County. As part of an integrated rural development project run in conjunction with a local government-supported project office, these farmers now specialize in raising organic chickens. Over the past years, there has been a move in Amity’s rural development projects towards “green”, organic products. At the same time, Amity has been actively encouraging peasants involved in its projects to establish farmers associations. (*See also our interview with He Wen in this issue.*) The Aobaoliang project is a successful example of both trends.

The Inner Mongolian grassland is a fragile ecosystem, where overuse can easily lead to severe environmental degradation. In this environment, chickens are a suitable option for sustainable farming. In Aobaoliang, each family keeps around two hundred birds known as “shandi chongcaoji” in China, literally “mountain chickens that eat insects and grass”. While only inhabitants of plains will detect mountains in the flat Mongolian landscape around the project site, the chickens do indeed eat local herbs, grass and bugs during the summer. Special lamps that attract insects are lit at night to supply the birds with plenty of protein. With their appetite for bugs, the chickens even act as a “biological weapon” against the locusts so feared by local farmers. It has also been discovered that some of the local plants that abound around Aobaoliang act as natural immune boosters. This is especially important as standards for organic food strictly limit the types of feed and medicine farmers are allowed to give to their chickens.

The poultry produce of the Mountain Chicken Association first received gov-
ernment approval as organic food in July 2004; a recognition that has to be renewed annually. The smooth recognition of Aobaoliang’s produce as green products is one big success of the Mountain Chicken Association, which serves its members through a three-tier structure from the local producer upwards. While the production of chickens and eggs is in the hands of individual households, the association takes care of tasks like quality control, marketing, technical support and the supply of newly hatched chickens.

For Wei and his fellow farmers, starting a career in chickens begins with a micro credit that enables them to buy an initial supply of birds. Wei Erfu’s fellow farmer Nie Haiyin is one such newcomer. He bought his first batch of two hundred chickens in 2004 with financial assistance from the government and the chicken association, and earned more than 1000 RMB [US$125 approx.] over the next months through the sale of eggs. Organic eggs sell for 0.6 RMB apiece in the local market, a third more than ordinary eggs. By the time he has to repay his loan, Nie will be in a comfortable position to do so.

Already, a number of families have been lifted out of poverty, among them farmer Wei’s. His household earned 10,000 RMB from hens and eggs in 2004, a genuine fortune in a village where the annual income used to be below 800 RMB per head [US$100 approx.].

Farmer Wei is not the only villager who is delighted with the possibilities the chicken business has opened up for him. A number of new applications have already been made by fellow villagers who want to join the association. “Applicants have to be ready to enter and they have to be trustworthy,” explains one local. “Currently, there still is space to take in new producers. However, the grassland available ultimately limits the number of chickens we can raise. Last year, the association produced 17,500 animals altogether. We estimate that 30,000 will be the ecological limit.”

The chicken business also allows Wei to stay in the village rather than go out in search of paying jobs. “I used to go out weeks at a time to earn some money for our daughter’s tuition fees,” he says. Ensuring the 14-year-old’s middle school education still is his primary concern, and he is saving part of the money he makes for that purpose. His plans for 2005 are ambitious: he intends to raise five hundred chickens, a 25% increase on the already sizeable amount of four hundred birds in 2004. However, when asked how often his family eats chicken, an embarrassed smile flashes across the farmer’s face. Chicken dishes, it appears, are still very much reserved for meals with visitors.

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**Green Light For Development: Farmers Organizations And Organic Farming**

_Katrin Fiedler_

In spite of an ongoing trend towards urbanization, the majority of Chinese people still live in the countryside - 62 percent or a staggering 800 million people. While China’s rapid economic development has benefited rural households in the coastal areas, peasants in the country’s west continue to struggle for survival. Harsh environmental conditions and the pressures of liberalized markets hamper the development of communities where educational standards are low and the lack of capital makes investing into new farming techniques or venturing into other businesses difficult.

From China’s Inner Mongolian grasslands to minority communities in the country’s southwest, Amity offers assistance in rural development projects that can take a variety of forms. Integrated Rural Community Development Projects provide opportunities for development to rural areas through an integrated and participatory approach. Usually, components of such projects will be basic education and healthcare, micro-finance and agricultural production. One typical example of this approach is Amity’s rural development project in Wuding. Environmental Production and Economic Development Projects have a strong emphasis on community resource management, including the areas of forestry and grassland management. Situated in ecologically fragile environments, these projects also advocate the use of alternative sources of energy. The rural development project in Aobaoliang presented in this issue of ANL is one example of this “dark-green” approach to development. Educational Poverty-Reduction Projects tackle educational development issues through the rebuilding of schools, financial support for school drop-outs and college students and the provision of village libraries. Finally, Miscellaneous Small-Scale Projects address very specific needs within rural communities, such as the provision of fresh drinking water or the use of biogas. These projects often also serve to explore new approaches or models within Amity’s rural development work.

One such new model that has evolved over the past few years is the continued development of autonomous farmers organizations. By the end of 2004,
70 farmers associations had been established in connection with Amity projects. These include producers associations, women’s development funds, agricultural production funds and micro-finance management centres.

A second trend within Amity’s rural development work is the increasing importance of organic agriculture. Apart from being less harmful to the environment, organic production also offers a niche for China’s poor farmers to compete successfully with producers from other countries.

Finally, many of Amity’s rural development projects involve ethnic minority communities. In its project work, Amity has found that development projects within poor rural communities have a better chance of sustainability if the upgrading of skills and abilities build upon and takes place within the context of local knowledge, traditions and culture. Accordingly, Amity aims at raising local partners’ awareness of the strengths of their local cultures. While implementing rural development projects with Yi and Wa minority communities, for example, Amity helped them to set up seven different farmers performing arts teams, encouraging them to conserve and promote their ethnic traditions and thereby strengthening unity within the community as a whole.

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**Rural, Independent, Strong - Independent**

**Rural Associations Spin Off From Amity’s Projects**

In recent years, a number of independent organizations have sprung up in connection with Amity’s rural development projects. In Yanchi (Ningxia Autonomous Region), local partners involved in running Amity’s local integrated rural development project set up an independent association for poverty alleviation as a result of their exposure to Amity’s work. In Puding (Guizhou Province), a women’s development foundation emerged from Amity’s microfinance programme, and in Xuyi (Jiangsu Province), local strawberry producers set up a producers association. While they differ in their aims and structures, all of these independent organizations add sustainability to Amity’s work. Below, He Wen, head of Amity’s Rural Development Division, talks about the latest organizational offspring - a cooperative producing and marketing organic chickens in Aobaoliang (Dalate County), Inner Mongolia.

*Interview: Katrin Fiedler*

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**Why should Chinese farmers organize themselves in producers associations? Hasn’t the privatization of China’s farm economy been hailed as a big success?**

How can farmers within the privatized farm economy cooperate to deal with market forces? That is the idea behind organizations like the Mountain Chicken Association. [Before China’s policy of reform and opening,] China’s farming economy used to be organized in cooperatives, but over the past two decades, China’s peasants have produced as private entities. In the case of the rural poor, agricultural production was focused on production for personal consumption only, but now farmers need to produce more.

**How does the emergence of producers associations relate to the overall concept of participatory development?**

For a number of years now, we have been implementing projects based on the principle of participatory development. However, this participation normally stops at a certain point, when Amity withdraws from the project. Fostering the development of local associations is a more systematic way of encouraging farmers to cooperate with each other and to be involved in participatory development beyond the time frame of Amity’s project.

**Did the idea of systematically fostering structures for community organization originate from**
Amity's side or was it brought up by local beneficiaries?
It was Amity's idea to provide farmers with this enhanced way of participation. The developmental aspect of our work is very important, but we want to give our local beneficiaries more [than improved production facilities]. It is absolutely necessary for us to go this route of strengthening local organizational capacities, otherwise we will turn into a donor agency that only supplies material help and then leaves. How can we help farmers to further develop? That is the core question.

In what way is the Mountain Chicken Association different from similar organizations, for example the strawberry association in Amity's Xuyi project? (See ANL No. 58/3, Jul-Sep 2001)
The Xuyi Strawberry Association is simpler, it basically is a kind of union of individual producers that manage their own production process. In the case of the Mountain Chicken Association here in Aobaoliang, we have a more comprehensive structure in which different aspects of the production process are unified, for example technical management and marketing. Both projects centre around organic farming and green products, as do virtually all of our rural development projects by now. Our emphasis on organic farming is not only an expression of the inherent superiority of organic products and the organic production process, but also a reaction to the pressures of market forces and the fragile ecosystems China's poor farmers are working in. Green products offer a niche for Chinese farmers to compete successfully in.

How do local farmers respond to the idea of organic farming?
In general, we will advocate a form of agricultural production that is suitable for the developmental stage of the location in question. Of course, to peasants who are used to subsistence farming you have to introduce the financial benefits of organic farming above all. It is true that our beneficiaries are poor as well as rather uneducated and that the bigger ideas behind organic farming may be new and alien to them. But it is also true that those serving them - that's us - are literate and can bring new ideas across. The peasants are our "bosses", and we can see ourselves as working for them, with all our access to information that they do not have.

Educating For The Future

"This is a fine programme!" With these words, Summer Program volunteer Tom Hyle summarized his experience as a teacher of teachers in China's west. The Summer English Program aims at improving the listening and speaking abilities of Chinese middle school teachers through exposure with foreign volunteer teachers. In 2004, 62 native English speakers made the journey to underdeveloped western regions in China, and most of them echo Tom Hyle's assessment in their reactions.

"This has been an excellent, if extremely hard-working experience! I have got to know much about life in China's poorer areas, and am immensely grateful to the students for sharing details of their lives so willingly. Their commitment to learning and speaking was a model for English students and the thanks they gave us was overwhelming. I am sure they did learn much from us, but we also learned much from them. Amity's Summer English Program is a superb programme for building international relations, and it is a true example of faith in action," says 2004 volunteer Sally Wilkins, and her colleague Barbara Mosch writes in a testimonial: "Coming to China has been the fulfillment of a long-time dream, and coming as a teacher surpassed all my deepest desires. I came hoping to be a positive witness to Christ and a goodwill ambassador for the US. I am leaving having found God's presence here among God's people. Without exception, the people of Guangyuan welcomed and accepted me. I felt very much at home and most appreciated. The experience has been rich, warm and wonderful - one I will always treasure."

The Summer English Program is only one project among a number of programmes run by Amity's Education Division. While all Amity projects include training for beneficiaries and local project managers, the Education Division houses a number of projects that are dedicated specifically to education. Long-established and probably best known is the Amity Teachers Program, which brings dozens of volunteers to China each year to come and teach for an extended period of time at teacher training institutions. Aimed at raising the English standards of future English teachers, the set-up of the programme stresses the idea of sustainability inherent to all educational programmes. Along a similar vein, a Domestic Faculty Development Program offers scholarships for faculty from teachers training institutions in China's remoter areas to pursue further studies.

But it is not only the teachers who receive support. Through contributions
from current and former Amity teachers, a number of rural primary and secondary school dropouts are relieved of the burden of tuition fees each year and can return to their studies. Amity also provides a number of schools established by migrant workers in Nanjing with equipment to enhance the students' learning environment.

In recent years, Amity’s education programmes have had a special focus on Guizhou Province. The poor funding situation as well as the relative geographical isolation give local teacher training institutions little access to academic exchange opportunities. To enhance the leadership skills of college leaders, a Leadership Training Program was initiated. Lecture tours by visiting specialists, both Chinese and foreign, are an additional means of exposing faculty at local teacher training colleges with advanced research, teaching and management ideas.

As much as teaching is a core element of Amity’s education projects, learning is part and parcel of the experience, not only for the students concerned. More often than not, the teachers involved feel that they are the ones who benefit most from the exchange. Says Hugh Anderson, Summer English Program 2004 volunteer: “Coming to China, to me, is part of my Christian service. However, I continually discover that no matter how much I serve, I am served even more by the Chinese people. One cannot outgive the Chinese. My Christian witness involves a willingness on my part to be committed to giving my best as a teacher, and it involves an ability on my part to receive with humility the many gifts of gratitude given by the Chinese. Thank you, Amity, for making this happen.”

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“How I Became a Teacher of National Excellence” - Amity’s Young Faculty Development Scholarship Program

Supported by the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UB), Amity has been running its Young Faculty Development Scholarship Program since 1996. Aimed at the capacity building of faculty at local teachers colleges, the programme supplies young teachers with scholarships for further studies. Participants enhance their abilities either as visiting scholars, by studying course development or by working on an M.A. degree. Recipients of the scholarships mostly work at teachers colleges in China’s western provinces. Feedback from former grantees has been exceedingly positive, with 97% of participants saying that their teaching and research abilities had improved through the programme.

Ordinarily, doing an M.A. degree would cost participants two to five annual incomes, a sum that puts such studies out of the reach of most instructors at teachers colleges in China’s underdeveloped areas. Over the past years, the programme has supported 381 teachers from 85 institutions; 90% of the recipients had only a bachelor’s degree when entering the programme. Special emphasis is being given to supporting women faculty. Below, Li Xiaolian from Luzhou Vocational Technical Training Institute shares some of her experiences with the scholarship programme.

"If there are people who say that I have gained tremendously regarding my teaching and research abilities over the past years and if I have had a number of successes, then all of this is only due to the fact that I was given an opportunity, that I had the lucky chance of coming across the Amity Foundation. And the opportunity I was given has let me reach the next level in my quest for higher standards."

“I teach at Luzhou Vocational Technical Training Institute, a government-supported local institute for higher education, but the funds supplied by the government are extremely limited. Located in southern Sichuan, our area borders on Yunnan and Guizhou and is home to two officially designated poverty counties.” As the only local institute for higher education offering English language training for middle school teachers, 80% of local English teachers are graduates of the school, but the lack of equipment and poor language standards of the faculty mean that Luzhou’s English teachers are not particularly well trained. “In our area, many talented students miss out on the opportunity of going to university because their English language standards are not up to it. Those who do graduate from university later do not return to their home cities to teach.”
New Lease of Life For Luoning’s Amity Hospital
Katrin Fiedler

When Luoning’s Christian Hospital closed after two rocky years, few would have given the clinic a second chance. China has seen a steady rise in private medical practitioners over the past years, and the small town in western Henan was no exception. Why try to revive a failed venture, if there were plenty of private clinics around? However, these small clinics were often too expensive for the rural poor, and many did not offer consistent quality healthcare. Opened in the name of one qualified doctor, these small practices used to tend to patients regardless of whether the medic in question was present or not. In this environment, Luoning’s Christian-run Hospital had been trying to offer a cheaper and better alternative. Yet mismanagement and low medical standards had shaken the locals’ trust in the clinic, and after the hospital’s closure they were once more left with relatively expensive healthcare as their only choice.

Fortunately for Luoning’s poor, one man had the vision and energy to give the Christian hospital a new lease of life: Zhang Weiming. The 34-year-old internist and evangelist took loans in his personal name to ensure the running of the clinic, revamped the management and changed some staff. In September 2004, the hospital was reopened under the name of “Amity Hospital Luoning” under the management of Zhang. Amity had already been supporting the hospital under the previous management. Some of the staff had received training supported by Amity and parts of the clinic’s medical equipment had been bought with Amity’s help.

Seven months after the reopening, the hospital is popular again with patients. Many of them are Christians who heard about the hospital in church. Huang Miaoshu from Sanxiang Township travelled 25 kilometres to have her gallstones removed here. Why did she choose the Amity Hospital? “It is cheaper for us here than elsewhere,” says her husband. “And the doctors here are particularly friendly and attentive,” Huang herself adds. With two children and a grandmother to take care of, the significantly lower priced medical services are more than welcome in this family of apple farmers.

In the adjacent room, middle-aged Duan Shuiju is being treated for trouble with the blood circulation in her brain. The retired teacher could probably afford to go elsewhere for treatment, but “The atmosphere in this hospital is so different from other clinics,” she explains while a doctor is adjusting her IV. “It feels like home.” Like Huang, Duan heard about the clinic in church. In her congregation, there are many poor patients who direly need the access to cheap medical care the clinic offers. “Our mission is to serve the rural poor,” explains hospital director Zhang.

“The most important qualification for our staff is a loving heart.”

All hospital services are priced considerably lower than in other comparable hospitals. “Our salaries are very low,” explains Zhang Weiming how the venture survives financially. So, is it difficult to attract qualified doctors? According to Zhang, this has not been a major problem so far. “They come for the sake of God’s love.” Certainly Luoning’s location in a province with a large Christian population helps to find...
staff that are willing to sacrifice their personal financial well-being. Ten percent of Luoning's population are Christian, ten times more than the Chinese average. However, being a Christian is not a precondition to work in the clinic, which currently has twenty staff altogether. "The most important qualification we look for in potential staff is that they must have a loving heart," the hospital director adds. "Without this willingness to provide loving care, not even the most qualified person will be hired."

Cao Zhenqing, an internist, left his job at another hospital to work for the Amity Hospital in Luoning. What motivated the non-Christian to change jobs? "I want to help Christians in establishing this service for the poor. Luoning is an officially designated poor county and there are still many people who can't afford to see doctors or who don't have access to medicine and doctors in their home villages." During the conversation, he also reveals that through his exposure to Christianity, he has become interested and now occasionally attends worship services. "Christianity teaches people good morals," he says, adding that the cooperation between Christian and non-Christian staff at the hospital works well. "Those who are not Christians must at least have a certain sympathy for it."

As the patients' satisfaction shows, the hospitals' paramount emphasis on loving care is now slowly paying off. All patients who have to stay in hospital will also receive a special gift from the clinic - two fish. "When we discovered that some of our patients are so poor that they do not even know how to prepare fish because they have never been able to afford it, we decided to give two fish to each patient as a sign of our love for them." Some will probably read more into this gesture. In Luoning, the Christian message is discreet but convincing.

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**Battling Disease, Struggling With Dialects**

**Amity's Mobile Medical Team Visits Luoning**

*Katrin Fiedler*

Luoning Christian Hospital is a Christian-initiated venture that offers quality healthcare to the county's rural residents. (*See "New Lease..." in this issue.*) While Amity supported training programmes for some of the hospital's resident doctors in the past, their abilities are still limited. To expose local doctors to advanced medical practices as well as to offer specialist services to Luoning's population, Amity's mobile medical team visited the hospital in March of this year. The free consultations offered by Nanjing specialists allow those patients to come for medical check-ups who normally cannot afford to see a doctor, even though Luoning Amity Hospital's services are substantially cheaper than those of other local doctors. The presence of specialist doctors also allows resident practitioners to pick up some skills as they work alongside the visitors.

For China's rural poor, going to the doctor is a big thing. "Every second Chinese has never visited a doctor," Chinese vice health minister Zhu Qingsheng revealed at a conference in late 2004. Observing the patients that stream into Luoning's Amity Hospital on a chilly March morning, it becomes clear that this is no exaggeration. Some of the patients have been suffering for years before now coming forward for a free specialist examination from the visiting team of Nanjing doctors organized by Amity. Others are unaware of standard medical procedures and the doctors take time to explain why it is necessary to bring old medical records along to examinations, or why certain tests can only be done on an empty stomach.

An old lady named He has travelled 45 km accompanied by her daughter for today's medical consultation. Why did she choose to come here, in spite of the costly and exhausting journey, rather than going to a doctor nearby? "We have confidence in the specialists. After consulting them, my health will certainly improve," says the old lady. Other patients echo her view. "Of course there is that other big hospital here in town," says a middle-aged man.
in the queue, "but we trust this hospital and the specialists more."

"Our main function is to solve those medical problems that can be immediately solved, and to refer patients to other hospitals if necessary. We want them to avoid spending money on numerous irrelevant examinations in clinics that are not competent for their specific problems," explains Dr Wang Jinzhu, in charge of Amity's visiting team of medical doctors, in between two patients. "I just prescribed a patient a medicine that only cost him 1 RMB [US$ 0.13 approx.]. He was overjoyed and told me that he had previously been prescribed a 10 RMB medication. I told him that for his ailment, the cheaper medicine was just right."

"Among the rural women here, we still recognize diseases that we encountered when we were young doctors in the countryside in the 1960s. One example is uterine prolapse, a medical condition that occurs when women resume physical work too quickly after giving birth. The fact that they can't afford to rest shows how poor they are," says Wang. In its advanced stage, uterine prolapse causes pain so severe that patients are unable to walk. During the medical team's stay in Luoning, one woman calls the hospital from a location 35 kilometres away. Her's is precisely such a case of uterine prolapse. She is unable to travel to the Luoning Amity Hospital and asks whether one of the visiting specialists could come to see her.

"Poverty aggravates existing medical problems if they remain untreated. We often see cases of conditions that can be easily treated in their early stages, but tend to become very serious later, such as uterine prolapse or hepatitis," says hospital director Zhang Weiming.

Concrete medical help aside, there is also a management aspect to the help provided by the mobile team. "I see my task as helping with medical expertise as well as with management skills," says one gynecologist on the team. "In order to raise medical standards, the hospital also needs the corresponding management skills."

Surprisingly, for the visiting doctors the most tiring aspect of working in an alien environment under simple conditions is not the lack of equipment, but language problems. "We don't understand the patients' dialect and the patients don't understand our standard Chinese," sighs Dr. Wang. "That makes for tiring working days."

Unheated consultation rooms, long working hours and the unaccustomed northern Chinese food all add up to an exhausting experience for the mobile medical team members, but there are many moments that are worth every effort. Take the example of the young woman who complained about occasional pain in her hip. After a number of check-ups, doctor Wang declares her healthy. "Those are the best moments - when you can dispel somebody's worries," she declares.