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The Amity Foundation is an independent Chinese voluntary organisation. It was created in 1985 on the initiative of Chinese Christians. It has worked to promote education, social services, health, and rural development in the underdeveloped areas of China.
Amity’s work is grounded in the belief that all human beings share the same dignity. Abiding by the principle of mutual respect in faith, Amity builds friendship with both Christians and non-Christians in China and abroad. In this way, Amity contributes to China’s social development and openness to the outside world. It makes Christian involvement and participation in meeting the needs of society more widely known to the Chinese people and serves as a channel for people-to-people contact and the ecumenical sharing of resources. Helping to develop civil society in China is one of the key aims of its work.
The Amity Foundation has about 40 full-time staffers at its Nanjing headquarters. Hundreds of volunteers work with Amity all over China. The foundation receives funds from partners abroad as well as in Hong Kong and mainland China.
Electricity, a Mobile Phone and a New Life

by Li Xue

In this feature story, former Amity staffer Li Xue describes a home visit to a Tibetan family during her assignment on researching Amity’s environmental protection projects.

Standing on a stone terrace high above the Longyangxia hydroelectric power plant in central Qinghai, you can see the Yellow River in the distance. Here, close to its source, the river’s emerald water flows gently, very unlike its raging “golden torrents” hailed in the famous song “Ode to the Yellow River”. The power station of Longyangxia provides electricity for the whole of China. But people in the village of Waliguan right by the side of the plant still use candles and yak oil to light their lamps.

Early that day, Ren Qingkuan, a 22-year-old Tibetan head of a family, receives quite a few visitors at his home. Fellow villagers, the village Communist Party cadre, staff from the provincial administration and two women - strangers coming from a far-away place - stand in the courtyard of his little house on one of the dry hills far above the river valley.

Just the day before he had gone down to the foot of the mountain to fetch water from the Yellow River. Two new plastic canisters filled with water are still standing conspicuously on the trailer of his tractor outside the house. It is a bit embarrassing that the guests are taking a closer look at them.

These days, the weather is fine and fetching water is not giving him as much trouble as before. In a period of ten days he goes for water twice. This is still a heavy burden, since fuel for the eight kilometers costs him 25 yuan. But going to the township instead and buying tap water would also be expensive. Still pondering, Ren Qingkuan ushers the guests into his house.

Unusual guests

Most visitors find chairs to sit, but the two women from far away put down their backpacks, produce two very big cameras and start taking pictures non-stop. Before his wife went out this morning, she had cleaned the house a bit and she had made it clear to Ren Qingkuan that he was expected to wear his neat blue pants, the pair his younger sister has made for him. His sister is only 16 but she has already left for Hainanzhou sewing clothes as a migrant worker in the city. It is not easy to live by yourself far away from home. You always miss your family. It is a pity that Gawa and her younger brother are both at school. Otherwise they would be able to meet the guests, one of whom is from a foreign country. Wouldn’t that be fun?

When the two women begin to...
take pictures, the village cadre says: “Hey, Ren Qingkuan, look at the camera, smile a bit!” But the women disagree: “Nobody wants you to look at the camera, just relax.” Listening to all this, Ren Qingkuan becomes even more confused. He just keeps standing where he is, clutching the corners of his coat nervously, not turning his head and trying to avoid any movement. Finally, the photo session is over and the two women pull their notebooks out.

A common Tibetan life
The interview starts: “How many people are there in your family?” asks one of the women. “Seven. My father and mother, my younger brother and sister, my wife, my child and me.” “Can you estimate your annual income?” “My family has over 400 mu of pasture, we have 200 goats and no cow. So the annual income of my family is around 700 yuan.” “Is anybody a migrant worker?” “Yes. I work in town. I transport stuff with my wheelbarrow in a silicon ore factory, and I heat the furnace.”

“Heaven you have any hopes for the future?” Ren Qingkuan thinks of his parents, who graze goats high up in the mountains, and he thinks of himself, a migrant worker. For a month every year he climbs up to remote mountain areas to collect Caterpillar Fungus, a kind of Chinese traditional medicine, which sells at a good price in places as far away as Hong Kong ... After a moment of silence he says: “I hope that my son will find work when he’s grown up. For myself, I would like to open a little kiosk to make some more money, so my parents can live a more comfortable life.” Then he adds quietly: “I also would like to have a refrigerator.” “How is that?” “Well, I heard that food you put into it in summer tastes much better.”

The two women close their notebooks and begin to chat. Ren Qingkuan sighs a breath of relief. Meanwhile, the village cadre starts fumbling with a solar powered device on the cupboard, trying to introduce to the two women the project Amity has financed. Ren Qingkuan smiles: this new energy generating device is really a good thing. Now, the family has electricity any time. In the evening it is much easier to find things in the room with a light bulb switched on and when the hard life of a peasant allows it, the family can sit down together and watch TV. This is something they would have never dreamed of before.

The two women also want to talk to another Tibetan man, called Cizhengzhaxi. Ren Qingkuan makes him sit down at a wooden table and, turning to the visitors, says: “His Chinese is quite good; it’s perfectly alright to ask him questions in Chinese.”

A new freedom
Cizhengzhaxi is an old neighbor, 35 years old (left). Since his home is only a ten-minute walk away, he likes to stop by at Ren Qingkuan’s house once in a while. He is a lively man. One of his daughters already goes to a minority middle school in town but his two young girls still attend elementary school in the village. His younger sister works as a waitress in town while he takes care of the animals at home.

Cizhengzhaxi is chatting away, telling the two women about high school fees and the need for most of the family members to earn some extra money to supplement the yields from their husbandry, when suddenly his mobile phone rings. Excusing himself for a moment he receives the call in sonorous Tibetan, leaving the two interviewers marveling at this incomprehensible language.

It is strange to see a mobile phone
in the rugged hands of a Tibetan herdsman, but Cizhengzhaxi explains after he has finished the call. About two years ago he bought a mobile phone, even before solar panels arrived at the village. His fellow villagers, who frequently went into town, had told him that a mobile phone was a good thing. So he bought one. Every time he went to town he took his phone with him to recharge it, but usually he would not find a place to do so. When the battery died he just put the phone aside, not using it. But last year, Amity gave the villagers solar panels to generate electricity. Now everybody can recharge their mobile phones at home any time.

“After I got the mobile phone,” says Cizhengzhaxi, “my life changed greatly. Before, when I wanted to talk to my daughter in town I had to wait for other villagers to go there, giving them a message for her. It took three to five days, all in all.

Sometimes, my daughter had a message for me in return. The village people would bring it with them on their way back home. I received her messages as long as somebody from the family was at home. But when everybody was out grazing goats, I wouldn’t get them.”

He also says that it is now much easier to inquire about good prices for animals and to gather people from the village, who live far apart from each other, sometimes 10 kilometers. Before, it took half a day to inform everybody, now it takes the time of a phone call.

The interviews are finished. Everybody walks up the little hill beside the house to take pictures of the solar panel and its owner. To render a more natural picture, the two women ask Ren Qingkuan to make a call with his phone. So he calls the party secretary who is standing next to him. Laughter and the clicks of the camera shutter accompany the mock phone call. There is no other sound in the village, which has not yet suffered from pollution or the noise of the city. In the distance, the Yellow River flows, clear and eternal.

When talking about environmental protection in China, what comes first to mind are blackened rivers, chimneys belching toxic smoke and the government’s elusive promises to make China more energy-efficient and reduce CO₂ emissions. All of these problems are widely discussed internationally because whether people around the world will still be able to live decent lives in the future will depend on solving them.

It is far less well known that millions of people in China are already deeply affected by a deteriorating environment. These people are so poor that any further environmental degradation poses a great threat to their well-being. In the harsh climate of Inner Mongolia or the Qinghai Plateau, protecting the environment is not a matter of long-term planning for future generations. Where even small changes in the ecosystem can destroy people’s health and sources of income, protection becomes a bare necessity for survival - today.

The firewood trap
Take, for example, the need for fuel. On the high plateau in China’s western regions, where winter temperatures drop to minus 30°C (minus 22°F), people use whatever firewood they find to heat their stoves and cook their meals. They do so to survive today even if it means killing the plants and thus destroying their future. They have no choice.

In some areas of Qinghai, collecting firewood has already eliminated 60% of the vegetation over the last twenty years, leaving hill slopes barren and exposed to the encroaching desert sands. Worse still, using firewood as fuel is highly time-consuming. Women spend hours every day collecting wood in the mountains, sometimes going out three times a
day. While they prepare meals they are constantly exposed to toxic smoke from the stoves in their kitchens. Under these conditions, nothing short of a complete replacement of firewood with alternative energy sources will slow desertification, preserve what is left of the vegetation, reduce CO₂ emissions and help people lead better and healthier lives.

The power of the sun and pigs
Yang Wenyao (right), mayor of a small village on Lake Longyangxia, a reservoir of the Yellow River in central Qinghai, is determined to change all this in his village. The old woodstove in his kitchen is cold. “Nobody uses it anymore,” says Mr. Yang, igniting the blue flame of a small gas stove. The mayor and his family now cook all of their meals with biogas. His two pigs out in the pen and three cows keep providing enough fresh manure for the gas stove to keep running.

“The women,” says the mayor, “profit most from the change, because they were the ones to collect firewood and cook, inhaling unhealthy fumes.” As another positive side-effect, the Yang family can now dispose of their household’s animal waste without polluting the lake.

Still, energy can be had which is even cheaper and cleaner than biogas. Outside the kitchen, Mr. Yang’s water kettle is coming to a boil amidst the lush peony bushes of his garden. No smoke rises from underneath the kettle, only a gentle glow emanates from innumerable little reflectors. The solar stove heats the water in just a few minutes, helping the Yang family to reduce toxic emissions and energy costs considerably.

As a village mayor, Mr. Yang was able to introduce solar stoves to all 273 households when Amity pledged support in 2004. Now, every single family owns one. Many families have also decided to use biogas as an alternative energy source even though the set-up of a biogas system requires some money to be invested before it becomes profitable.

Hidden advantages
Using clean renewables has yet another advantage: it reduces poverty and empowers people from below. On the other side of Lake Longyangxia, near the river dam, the installment of solar panels on roof-tops has given local Tibetans some unexpected benefits. The village is not connected to the national power grid but thanks to abundant sunshine on the high plateau the village dwellers, who received panels under Amity’s solar energy project, are able to generate and store enough electricity to run a TV for several days, a light bulb for a week or, even more important, recharge a mobile phone.

Cizhengzhaxi, a Tibetan herdsman in his thirties, cannot do without his mobile phone any more when he does business. Before he owned one, it took
him two days and two trips into town before he could sell his livestock. The first trip he made to inquire about the price and the second to fetch his animals if prices turned out to be high enough. Since he purchased a mobile phone, a single phone call has been enough for a price enquiry. One problem remained, though: he had no electricity to recharge the battery. He used to walk 8 kilometers into town to find a recharger, and even then he sometimes could not recharge his phone.

Having a solar panel changed everything. Access to solar power makes time-consuming trips into town unnecessary, makes price and market information more transparent, renders his business more competitive and also improves communication with his children, who attend school in the city. Better still, he and other families in his village who own their private roof-top panels remain independent from volatile energy prices.

However, Cizhengzhaxi and his fellow herdsmen remain highly dependent on natural forces. Raising goats and yaks for a living will inevitably come to an end if the arid rangelands are not protected against further degradation as a result of overgrazing, intruding rodents or incoming desert sands. That is why villagers on the high plateau feel it is necessary to protect their pastures in

People in Qinghai have come to appreciate biogas stoves (below left) for cooking and occasional heating, even though it takes some money to invest in the new technology.

Two pigs are enough to provide biogas for a family to cook their meals every day.

Since desertification and pollution has become a mounting problem, “green energy” sources like a solar stove (left) play an ever more important role in the lives of farmers and herdsmen.
order to survive and maybe even succeed in reducing poverty.

**Grassland preservation**

Among people living in the high grasslands and the arid or semi-arid hills of Qinghai’s high plateau, poverty can only be substantially reduced if grassland conservation is taken seriously. Rural residents live in an ecologically fragile environment. It is estimated that 90% of the grassland is in a state of deterioration. At an average elevation of 3000 meters (about 9800 feet) above sea level, even minor changes in the ecological system of Qinghai can lead to quick environmental degradation, which can be devastating to the lives of local people. Each year Qinghai Province loses around 200 square kilometers (about the size of New York City) of its fertile soil to the desert.

Policies of former decades have exacerbated the problem. Between the 1950s and the end of the 1970s, great numbers of people from Eastern China were relocated to Qinghai in order to realize a large-scale agrarian transformation: high-altitude rangeland was turned into fields. This plan was designed to boost agricultural output in order to feed the fast-growing population of China. But because the top soil layer in these areas is very thin, the land could not sustain long-term agricultural use.

As a consequence, crop fields have been converted back into rangeland on a grand scale since 2003 in an effort to preserve what is left of the top soil. This is reasonable but for the local herdsmen it means they have to spend a fortune on buying grass seeds and building fences to protect grass-sprouts from being eaten prematurely by their flocks. In a small mountain village in Guinan County, this burden was relieved when Amity provided fences and special grass seeds, which grow easily in this climate. The whole village helped to build fences between three to four kilometers long to protect their lower pastures and prevent their animals from nibbling away at recovering grass-sprouts in summer (below and right).

**Preventing a bleak future**

With environmental protection projects like these, Amity tries to help people for whom nothing less than losing their homes and their subsistence are at stake. Two years ago, Pan Yue, the deputy director of China’s State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), predicted that China will face 150 million ecological refugees in the coming years if pollution remains high and environmental degradation continues. We must make any effort to prevent this.
China's economic reforms of the past decades have yielded some impressive socio-economic results. Nevertheless, we should not be deceived by the miraculous achievements of the past 30 or so years. The forces unleashed by the reforms—economic liberalization, decentralization, and freer migration—have come at a price. To date, millions of Chinese people are still plagued by the scourge of backwardness, poverty and disease. The biggest challenges in today's China are striking a balance between development and social justice, wiping out poverty, and closing the developmental gap between regions and different social strata. These five major challenges are:

1. **Imbalanced social transformation:** A direct outcome of rapid economic growth is that China shifted from an ideology-based society to an interest-based society. This transformation has created different stakeholders or interest groups, leading to a so-called skewed society. There is an urgent need to adjust the current social structures and enhance the political and administrative capacity of the government in order to strike a balance between different interest groups in society.

2. **Environmental problems:** Pollution of all kinds (water, soil, food etc.) has become a serious threat to China, not only because its effects cost the economy the equivalent of around 5% of China's GDP. Complaints about environmental problems have amounted to 51,000 filed cases in 2005 with an annual increase of 30%. The high consumption of energy and natural resources caused by sustained economic growth and inefficient ways of using them have further exacerbated the state of the environment.

3. **Income inequality:** Despite economic growth, farmers are increasingly left behind. According to national statistics, in 2004, the annual per capita income in villages was 2,900 yuan, and in cities 9,400 yuan. Even though rural taxes were reduced or altogether scrapped in recent years, farmers are still among the poorest people in China.

4. **Unequal access to education and health care:** There is growing inequality between the rural and urban areas in terms of educational resource distribution, opportunity, and quality. In 2002, 77% of educational funding was allocated to the cities, and only 23% to rural areas. Health care benefits are also unevenly distributed. The number of health workers per 1000 people in the countryside was half the number in the cities in 2002.

5. **The spread of HIV/AIDS:** AIDS is no longer just a problem of public health - it has developed into an increasingly serious social and political problem. If no decisive steps are taken in the near future, AIDS will eventually pose an...
enormous danger to the stability, security and economic development of China.

Amity’s role

There is no time to lose. Policies need to be corrected and adjusted in order to put equity and justice at the core and to promote a stronger partnership between the government, the private sector and civil society. Such a partnership will help policy makers define key problems and formulate solutions that produce a high level of commitment needed to ensure successful implementation of reforms, equity and sustainability. What is being done in China?

Generally speaking, there are 3 types of Chinese NGOs: 1) charities which provide social services and material supplies, 2) organizations which work for sustainable development on a demand-driven basis to achieve self-reliance of beneficiaries, 3) agencies which aim at social transformation and encourage empowerment by increasing public participation, readjusting power relations and emphasizing people’s rights.

I think Amity falls between the first and the second category but it wants to move on to the third by assuming the following 4 strategic roles:

• **Resource provider** by continuing to raise resources (both material and financial) to help the people in need.

• **Service provider** by initiating social service projects that can directly serve the needy (with focus on the physically challenged).

• **Capacity builder** by providing training for Amity’s local partners and other NGOs.

• **Advocacy and consultancy agent** by linking NGOs to civil society by advancing democracy and social pluralism; promoting transparency and accountability in government and the market; improving decision making by providing a mechanism for public participation.

Our goals

We fully understand that we need to improve Amity’s capacity first in order to serve these roles. Amity needs to improve its organizational capacity, including human resource management and leadership skills.

Secondly, Amity needs to improve the capacity and professionalism of its staff. Thirdly, Amity needs to improve project management capabilities to strengthen project management evaluation of our work project.

Last but not least, Amity needs to improve its capacity to raise more funds within China proper to support its projects.

The work of Amity is rooted in the heart of the gospel message. Evangelism and social action are inseparable components of a holistic theology. Even though we are not an evangelistic organization - we are a Christian-initiated development agency - we are sharing the gospel visible through our solidarity with all who challenge poverty. Amity can play a decisive role in creating a more loving and caring society amidst China’s social transition.

Meet our local co-worker Mr. Zhao

Zhao Fucheng (left) is indispensable for Amity because he is one of the few people in central Qinghai who know how to build a biogas stove. This is no trivial matter because biogas systems have a complex mechanism.

About three years ago, Mr. Zhao became a Christian. One Christmas he went to the local church out of curiosity. All his life he had not been interested in religion, not even in Buddhism, which his parents practiced. “But during the Christmas service,” he said, “it made a lot of sense what the pastor said.” Two years later he, his wife and two daughters were baptized.

“It wasn’t easy at first,” remembers Mr. Zhao. His neighbors were suspicious of the sign of the cross inside his house. Fortunately these feelings didn’t last long: “People got used to it and started visiting again.”

When he doesn’t have to go out fishing, working in the fields or building biogas stoves on Sundays, his family attends the local church, together with over 110 other worshipers.

His biggest hopes for the future are that his children keep their Christian faith until they are adults and that they can attend university.
A Study in Contrasts

by Theresa Cariño

The 2007 Amity Easter Tour was a celebration of diversity. It brought together more than 20 participants from 8 countries in Asia, North America and Europe. The rich mix of cultural, professional and denominational backgrounds provided fertile soil for a healthy and stimulating exchange of views during the 10-day tour of Beijing and parts of Henan Province. There were old friends, who had known Amity for decades, and new ones, eager to discover Amity’s wide-ranging work in alleviating poverty in China. Some were stepping on Chinese soil for the first time, others were re-visiting after a long absence, but for everyone, the Easter Tour brought new knowledge and understanding of a society in constant flux.

Stark contrasts
In Beijing, we found old buildings and neighborhoods rapidly disappearing under the crunch of ruthless urban redevelopment. The Great Wall maintained its awesome presence but the Forbidden City was undergoing a major face lift to “preserve” it from the unmitigated battering wrought by millions of tourists tramping through its courtyards every day.

The contrast between Beijing, with its avant-garde Olympic stadium, shining skyscrapers and impossible traffic, and the villages where AIDS-infected farmers live came as a shock when we began our visit of Henan Province. Our brief stay in modern, urban Beijing had not prepared us for the stark simplicity of life in Henan’s poor villages, less than hours away by plane.

As we traveled past verdant wheat fields and impressive clover-leaved highways, we pondered over why there was so much poverty in Henan. Poverty and the “get rich quick” syndrome had driven Henan’s farmers to sell their blood to illegal “blood collectors” connected to hospitals. Contaminated needles had been used by callous individuals bent on making a fast buck. Today, there are 4,000 in Zhoukou alone who are infected with HIV/AIDS. Around Zhoukou, there are five AIDS villages with highly infected populations. At one such village, we met families that had lost close relatives and friends to the dreaded disease. What was more devastating to learn was that after they had stopped selling their blood, villagers had switched to making firecrackers with near fatal results. Her face badly scarred, the mother of the village head showed us her almost skinless, deformed hands, having suffered second degree burns from firecrackers she was trying to make.

Through Amity’s support for a “goat-raising” project, villagers are now being given an alternative to risky and dangerous ways of earning more income. With an average of three to five goats per family, they will be able to earn extra incomes of 2,000 RMB (roughly US$ 260) per year. Rev. Ma Xin of Zhoukou Gospel Church showed us his efforts to grow seedlings that will later be distributed to families for planting on the edge of their fields. In six years time, they will grow into trees, which can finally be cut and sold for extra income. We marveled at the initiatives of the local church and its creativity in responding to serious social problems in Chinese society.

Providing safer jobs
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Improving health care
The Zhoukou Christian Council, led by its able leader, Rev. Ma Xin, has been able to reach out to surrounding communities through acts of faith and love. There are more than 260,000 Christians in Zhoukou but only 6 pastors and 42 elders to lead more than 1,000 meeting points and churches. Apart from having to train 2,300 evangelists to share the gospel, the Christian Council has started social service projects that have gained admiration and respect from the people and government. It gives support to the Zhoukou Gospel Clinic, run by local doctor Ma Rui, and operates the Zhoukou Gospel Hospital, with plans to focus on women’s health, which is
most often neglected in the countryside.

Our visit to Henan had indeed provided a study in contrasts. The new and the modern coexisted with tradition and rich religious legacies such as the Longmen Grottoes, the Shaolin Temple and the Fuxi Tomb. Sandra Michael from the USA said the trip had given her insights into the culture and workings of Chinese society. During the trip, participants had the opportunity to see and feel the contrasts between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the modern and the traditional. What touched us most was the encounter with a church that was materially poor but spiritually abundant. Indonesian pastor Simon Filantropha was impressed by the ability of Zhoukou Gospel Church to combine theological training, education and health services. In a multi-religious context, he felt it was important that Amity should work with Muslims, Buddhists and Taoists, not only to empower the poor but to make peace with other religions. It should be a model for other NGOs.

While discovering China’s diversity was an adventure in itself, participants of the Easter Tour 2007 also enjoyed the rich mix of cultural and professional backgrounds in the group.

### News

**Academia**

**Religion and Public Welfare**

The positive role of faith-based welfare organizations in China was discussed at the first “Forum on Religion and Public Welfare”, co-sponsored by the Amity and Jinde Charities at Renmin University in Beijing on 26 June 2007. Participants included scientists from several top-class universities, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), representatives of other faith-based NGOs as well as the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA).

Zhang Liwei, Associate General Secretary of the Amity Foundation, said in his opening remarks: “We are convinced that the religions can make a substantial contribution to society. China’s social problems are too big and complex to be solved by the government alone. There are a lot of areas where organizations initiated by religious believers, such as Amity and Jinde, can play a positive role.”

Professor Deng Guosheng from the NGO Research Institute at Tsinghua University presented the findings of his recent study, explaining that NGOs with a religious background fared better in terms of their quality of service, mobilization of volunteers and efficiency in the use of natural resources than NGOs without such a background. Professor He Jianming warned against using narrow political criteria for the evaluation of religion.

Amity has been inviting local companies and organizations in Jiangsu to become actively involved in welfare projects.

Since the “Rural School Building” project was started several years ago, Amity has helped to rebuild over 300 schools in poverty-stricken areas of more than ten provinces.

### Poverty relief

**Safer Schools**

The Jiangsu Suyuan Law firm has provided a large donation to rebuild the Danzhuang Tibetan Elementary School in a village of Qinghai province. The contract with Amity was signed on 31 July 2007.

In September 2006 several Amity volunteers and representatives of the Suyuan law firm went to see this school, located in a tiny Tibetan hamlet in Eastern Qinghai.

It became clear during the visit that the school building was in very bad shape. The ceiling was coming down and the window panes were broken exposing the little children directly to the winter cold. Because the classrooms were too small, a growing number of children had to study out in the open.

When part of the building was on the brink of collapsing, the older students, who were able to walk three miles by themselves, went to another school in the next village. After this visit, the law firm decided to help by providing funds to build a new school.

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