Education

When Students Become Teachers

One Year as an Amity Volunteer in China

Background of Amity’s Education Program
The Amity Newsletter is a quarterly publication reporting on the projects of the Amity Foundation. It is distributed free of charge. However, we welcome an annual contribution of US$10 from readers.

Bank details
Account holder: The Amity Foundation Hong Kong, Ltd.
Account number: 127-5-017372
The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, 238 Nathan Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong

If you would like to receive the Newsletter, or desire further information on any of our projects, please feel free to write or call. Institutions receiving the Newsletter are welcome to reprint any article from it. Credit should be given to the Amity Newsletter, Quarterly Bulletin of the Amity Foundation.

Published by The Amity Foundation
Printed by the Amity Printing Company, Ltd.
Editor: Dr. Beate Engelen

Hong Kong Office
The Amity Foundation Hong Kong, Ltd., 13/F, Ultragrace Commercial Building, 5 Jordan Road
Kowloon, Hong Kong
Phone: (+852) 2723-8011
Fax: (+852) 2366-2769
E-mail: amityhk@pacific.net.hk

Headquarters
The Amity Foundation, 71 Hankou Road, Nanjing, 210008, China

Contents

3 Teachers Still Needed
China has made some progress in education. But many problems remain. Foreign teachers are still greatly needed to improve conditions in the countryside.

4 Village Excellence
When Gary MacDonald went on a visit to the home of one of his students during the Lunar New Year holidays, he witnessed an unusual event in the village.

5 “It is better to give than to receive”
Rachel Sterrett watched a student spread the mission of Amity in his hometown.

6 Bamboo Stick and Candy
Niclas Müller, a German volunteer who had just graduated from high school before he came to China, tells the story of his daily joys and woes as an oral teacher of English in a Chinese middle school (right) not far away from Nanjing.

9 Faith and Commitment
Liu Ruhong, Director of Amity’s Education Division, explains how Amity’s education program changed over the years and what teachers have to expect when they decide to teach with Amity in the remote cities of western China.

10 Song of Sadness in a Model Village
Tsoi Han, Amity’s new staff at the Hong Kong office, shares some of her reflections during a “service learning” trip with Hong Kong students.

11 News

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 50 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.
Dear friends of Amity,

After a small but enthusiastic team of project managers had set up shop in an old building at Nanjing Jinling Theological Seminary in 1985, the Amity Foundation was mainly known for its education program. For many years, the program grew in size and reputation. Almost 25 years on, the question is being asked more and more often: Does China still need support from abroad to come to grips with education?

There is no doubt that China has taken great strides to improve its educational system. In 1978, one year after universities across China, for the first time since the Cultural Revolution, began to accept new students, there were no more than 598 institutions of higher learning. In 2007, this number had grown to 2,236. Today, China turns out more college graduates than the U.S. and India combined. But these numbers show only one part of reality. Many children in China do not receive even a decent primary and secondary education, and only a small minority of students can go on to college.

It was only a few months ago that I met a young boy in a remote village in Sichuan whose situation in life made me realize once again how much a better educational system is needed in the Chinese countryside. When I talked to him in his mountain village near Panzhihua in southern Sichuan, my colleague Gong Sheng and I had just survived a cruel three-hour car ride on a road peppered with mud-filled potholes. The village, mainly inhabited by people from the Yi ethnic minority, had seen parts of the local school collapse during a strong earthquake in August 2008. Tents had been put up to accommodate the students while the school was being rebuilt, but the young boy told us he was not attending this school any way. Instead, he went to a school some 70 km away because this would give him a better chance to prepare for the university entrance exam. It was the poor learning environment at the village school, he explained, which would make it all but impossible for him to go to college later if he stayed.

The village school was indeed in a sorry state. A student canteen was missing so students had no choice but to eat their lunch standing out in the open. There were not enough beds in the dormitory either. Three students huddled together in one bed was a common affair. But the worst of it all were probably the teaching standards. Not even the most gifted, intelligent and hardworking student would learn enough here to be able to enter tertiary education. Unlike the young boy I talked to, most village children could not afford to go to a different school. Who gives children like them a chance?

This issue of the Amity Newsletter wants to provide a glimpse of how Amity has tried, and in some cases succeeded, to connect underprivileged but brilliant students with compassionate people from abroad. Many students have been able to improve their education and some of them have helped others in return. If you are interested in supporting or even joining any of the programs, no matter if it is the Amity Teachers Program, the Summer English Program, the Young Adult Program or the Service Learning Program, let us know!

Best,

Beate Engelen

For more information visit our website at:
www.amityfoundation.org
or write to Ms. Liu Ruhong, the director of our Education and International Exchange Division at: liuruhong@amity.org.cn
Amity Newsletter 91/4

Gary MacDonald has worked as an Amity teacher for almost twenty years, supported by the United Church of Canada. He is currently working at a College in Zhangye, a remote city in the Hexi Corridor of Gansu Province.

Joys of Being a Teacher

Village Excellence

by Gary MacDonald

During the Lunar New Year holiday I was the guest of Wang Yongdong, one of my students, in his small village. Mali Village (马力村) is one of many small communities hidden deep in the folds of mountain terrain. Patches of tired soil serve the continuing generations of subsistence farmers. There, the beauty of nature may well mask the reality of poverty and daily struggle familiar to its inhabitants.

On a morning when the temperature dipped to minus seventeen degrees, I awoke to meet children with ragged notebooks in one hand and small wooden stools in the other, as they gathered in my student’s home. They had come for an English class given by Wang Yongdong. In an unheated room with rough planks balanced on stones to serve as desks and mud brick wall as chalkboard, the morning lesson began.

In such a place, this is a familiar scene each Lunar New Year and summer holiday. My student, like many others, returns home to be with family and friends. As well as a chance to be home again, this is an important time to earn money for next term’s tuition. Life for those for whom income has never met demand does not allow much leisure time even on this, the most important holiday on the Chinese calendar.

In the constant struggle to finance his own education, Wang Yongdong does ask for a fee for his services as an English tutor to these children. Some of the children’s families can pay the full fee but for others this is simply not possible. Sometimes payment comes in the form of a simple meal for my student in one of the children’s homes. Perhaps someone’s mother may give my student a pair of homemade trousers. Another might give a bag of vegetables gathered from the fields. However, money or no money, a child is never turned away.

The week before he begins his classes, my student will visit some of the homes in this village. He gives particular attention to those families he knows cannot afford his classes. Quietly and simply he extends the invitation to his English class. Those children too, he says, need encouragement and help.

During my time in that village, I was a witness to something quite beautiful. My student prepared his lessons well. The children were eager to learn. As with any good teacher, my Wang Yongdong knew and cared for his pupils well.

On the last day of class, the lessons came to an end but it seemed that no one wanted to go home. There was a sense of holding on, of knowing that all this is good. The children stood around, laughing and joking. No one seemed to notice the bitterly cold air.

Eventually worn notebooks and the small stools were gathered, some strapped to the back of bicycles which also served to carry two or three children at one time. Best wishes for the Lunar New Year were given and this band of children moved on down the road.

All this I saw that week in a village far from any place of academic organization or structural power. The chanting of a morning lesson echoing through the cold mountain air.

Among mountain villages and in the bare desert towns of this part of China, this is something that can be found many times over. College students home at holiday time. The gift of knowledge passed on to others.

The fees charged do help toward next term’s tuition. And, if the college student is to continue his or her own education, necessary. However, in most cases, it is never enough. Returning to college, some students will go without meals and text books because there is never enough money.

Yet, they give their gift. Their students, those children, return to their own classrooms better equipped to learn in a renewed spirit of confidence.

In so many small villages, in tiny unheated rooms or even in the out-of-doors, a group of children come together. Older Brother or Older Sister home from college or university stands among them in the spirit of knowledge created anew.
Dear Friends,

During the weeklong October holiday, I headed off to the countryside to visit one of Gary McDonald’s students, who I have gotten to know over the course of the past year. His name is Wang Yongdong, and he comes from a very poor village in the countryside near Tianshui, a city in Gansu.

To say it was eye-opening would be an understatement. I’ve been to two other students’ homes in the countryside of Gansu, so the poverty didn’t shock me as it did on my first visit. I knew to expect an outhouse (although the pig next to the stall was different), no showers, lots of free time to read and hike, and lots of visits to local people curious to meet their first foreigner. What I did not expect was the welcome my student received.

Gary had told me that being with Wang Yongdong in his village was like hanging out with the big man on campus, but I was still taken aback by just how many people knew and even adored him. It was incredible to see the connections he has formed in his area. Yongdong has not ever been, nor has he become, a Christian, yet he clearly believes very strongly in the mission of the Amity Foundation: showing love by helping others. The Amity Foundation is the Chinese-run NGO that I serve here through my connection with the Presbyterian Church, and Wang Yongdong has expressed a strong interest in applying for a job through their branches here in Gansu.

He has taught computer, math, and English lessons to students in his village every summer and winter holiday, offering a higher level of education at a cheaper rate than in the surrounding villages. He especially concentrates on his computer lessons, because before he came to college he had studied computer theory in a textbook, but had never actually touched one. To ensure no students from his village are deprived as he was, he voluntarily eats cheaper meals in the school cafeteria to save his money, and uses those savings to buy old computers, fix them, and then use them in his lessons. He has lobbied the Amity Foundation for the funds to build a women’s health clinic near his hometown, and has also used the money he has made from his teaching to pay for his adopted sister’s education.

One day, Wang Yongdong received an Amity shirt from Gary, and studied the English phrase on the back: “It is better to give than to receive.” He then said to Gary “I know what this means.” Gary thought that he meant that he knew the origin of the phrase, but Yongdong said “No, I’ve experienced it. I know it’s better to give than to receive.”

Certainly, Wang Yongdong has already proven himself dedicated to opening up opportunities for all the people of his hometown, and his determination to make life easier on God’s children there has been an inspiration to me, as well as to others. Whether he realizes it or not, he has been living one of the core tenants of my faith, and once again I have seen proof that here in China, God’s Spirit “is alive and on the move” (a lyric from MercyMe). The joy on people’s faces when they see him is evidence of God working through those around me, and I feel so blessed to watch it occur.

I am privileged to watch a student return to his roots and use his newfound skills to assist others in reaching their full potential as human beings. May God continue to bless all of my students so, and may God also bless all of you with proof of His presence in the days ahead.

Moving with God’s Spirit,

Rae

Rae is teaching with Gary MacDonald in Zhangye (Gansu Province).

The letter was first published in Mission Connections http://www.pcusa.org/missionconnections/letters/sterrett/sterrett_0910.htm
A morning at Lishui Senior Middle School

As I am having breakfast in my flat on the fourth floor of a building for teachers, living on campus, I can hear loud music coming from the loudspeakers in front of the gym. More than one thousand students, dressed in school uniforms, are already doing their morning exercises on the playground (picture above).

Ten minutes later, I am heading in the direction of my office. The students have already been dismissed from the playground and are running on their way back. Soon I find myself amid a huge crowd, I have to take great care not to be knocked over and run over by the masses. Since the students only have five minutes left before class, they have to be fast runners to get a place in the limited number of toilets.

After walking past several giant buildings, I reach the office building for junior school teachers. My office is on the second floor of a four-storey building. As I’m stepping into the office, all my Chinese colleagues are already there, seated at their desks. Some are ready to leave for class, some are still enjoying some morning leisure. In the passages connecting the office building and the teaching building there are stacks of exercise books that are staggering. Upon closer examination, you will find there are actually students carrying the books, making their way to the teachers’ offices to hand in the homework of their class.

After this short period of chaos, as the next class starts, the campus gradually gets back to quiet and order.

At the same time my routine at the office starts. Usually, I will already have finished my lesson preparation the week before. Since most of my lessons take place in the afternoon, I still have some time to review my lesson plans and make some improvements.

My responsibilities

In this way normal working days have started in the past year in China. As a volunteer sponsored by Germany’s United Evangelical Mission, I participated in the Young Adult Program of the Amity Foundation. I had been asked to teach oral English to junior one students in Lishui (Senior) Middle School near Nanjing.
My students were just out of primary school and some of them even didn’t have any basic English knowledge. Every week they had six normal English lessons taught by a Chinese teacher and one additional oral English lesson given by me. Since the final exams, which decide what kind of senior high school they will be admitted to, do not include an oral English test, in most cases speaking skills are not considered significant for English teaching. As a result, most of the students are very weak at speaking. So my main task was to create situations in which the students can speak more English so in turn they will become more confident communicating in English.

Another important task was to help students gain some insights into western cultures. As a foreigner, I enjoyed certain advantages in teaching oral English and western culture because my students were usually excited to an unbelievable degree when they saw a “long-nose”, which was an unusual sight to them.

Due to their low level of English, my work was very challenging. Before class, I spent a lot of time collecting materials and creating worksheets, which involved much preparation work. There were six classes in Junior One, but for the whole week I only had to prepare one lesson plan. That also meant I had to choose carefully the contents I was going to teach.

In class
The bell rings, the last students rush back into the classroom and hurry on to their stools, out of breath. One student jumps up and takes a bamboo stick from the teacher’s desk. Music is flowing out of the loudspeakers and the students start rubbing their eyes according to the rhythm. Like a commanding general, the student with the bamboo stick is waving the stick threateningly at the mischievous students.

While the students are doing their daily eye exercises, I draw a short flow chart of the lesson on the blackboard. As soon as the music stops, the students rise from their seats and greet me in a chorus: “Good afternoon, Mister Miller!” After I reply back: “Good afternoon, everyone,”

some students look at me excitedly and expectantly. When I take some candies out of my bag and announce the names of the prize winners, some students walk proudly to my desk and claim their rewards for having done their homework three times. Since I started putting into practice my “new policy”, there has been an increasing number of volunteers who fight to read out their homework to the class.

After the homework check, I start to introduce the topic of the week. This time, we are going to talk about “animals”. First I give the students worksheets, on which there are ten pictures of different animals and their names in a different order. This is a very easy task, every student can name most of the animals. Next comes the long-awaited part of the lesson - the video clip. First the students have to read through the instructions and to understand their tasks. Upon seeing me connecting my laptop to the projector, some boys rush to switch off the lights of the classroom and wait on their seats for the movie to start. For the next five minutes, Jerry is chasing Tom on the screen. The students have great fun and their pressure from the whole morning’s study seems to have been released by their laughter. Now they have to put descriptions of the plot into the correct order and with this help, they are asked to retell the story to their desk-mates. Of course, it is very challenging for them to talk about the story in English and this is usually not their favorite part. After that, they get a picture story about Garfield and solve a crossword puzzle. The class ends with homework assignment.

English only
This is a typical lesson out of my thirty class topics. At the beginning of the year it was especially difficult for my students to understand my instructions, which I give only in English. I also tried my best to avoid using Chinese, which was one of my most important classroom rules. I tried to give my instructions within the limits of my students’ language skills and started using body language at the same time. Even though my students couldn’t understand every word, the instructions and information could be conveyed in general terms.

Even though the students only had one oral English lesson per week, the past year did witness a steady improvement in their spoken English. I was always impressed with my students’ diligence and enthusiasm in spite of their long days at school. At the age of eleven or twelve, they already had to be at school at half past six in the morning and were off at half past five in the afternoon.

I hope to see more and more young people that are going to join in this project because the work really pays off and is rewarding.

The Young Adult Program

Experiencing Chinese culture firsthand, making friends with people from a different country and sharing knowledge are the main reasons why young volunteers join this one-year program. Amity places the young adults in rural middle schools, where they provide oral English courses for students who have no chance to meet people from abroad, speak English with a foreigner and get to know a culture different from their own. In return, the volunteers learn Chinese if they wish, make friends with local people and experience everyday life in China.

The young adults, who are usually recent highschool graduates, have many different cultural backgrounds. So far, Amity has had volunteers coming from Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Germany and several other countries. These different origins help Chinese middle school students realize that there is a huge and enriching variety of cultures outside of China.

Join this program if you are seeking an adventure of a special kind. It will certainly turn out to be an exciting and rewarding experience.

www.amityfoundation.org
The Amity Teachers Program was established almost 25 years ago. Has the program made any difference to Chinese students?

Yes it has. Our program has given equal opportunities to small teachers’ colleges. The students and teachers in the small teachers’ colleges in the west part of China, and in particular in the small cities there, have profited most of all. Students feel more confident speaking English after they have been taught by Amity’s foreign teachers. Today, I just received an e-mail from an Amity teacher who is teaching in a small teachers’ college in Gansu. She was very pleased to share that 45 of her students, that is 15%, were able to pass an exam enabling them to get teaching jobs after graduation. This number is actually unusually high, because it is not easy for many graduates from small colleges to get such teaching jobs paid for by the government. Normally, students from small teachers’ colleges in western China cannot compete in the job market with students from the big cities in the east. So 15% is a high ratio.

Many Amity teachers tell me they can see that many of their students have no confidence in their own abilities, and their students think this is why they ended up in such a small college. The students often feel frustrated because they were not accepted by a big university. The Amity teachers do more for these students than just teaching them English. They talk to these students, share their personal experiences and provide their students good role models of working for people in need. Sometimes students wonder why their foreign teachers came to China when they could have chosen a more comfortable life in their home countries. “Why are they coming to our small teachers’ college to teach us,” they wonder. They are impressed by the help that Amity teachers are giving to them. Moreover, their schools also think that the Amity teachers are setting good examples for the students.

Has Amity made a difference to the teachers in the host schools, too?

The Chinese teachers in our host schools have also profited from the Amity teachers that have been placed at their schools. We have been told that some Chinese teachers commonly feel that they are not as good as the teachers in big universities. Sometimes, they lack confidence and interest in their work because they feel they are not good enough. However, because of having the Amity teachers working at their schools, they get a chance to interact with foreigners, just the same as the Chinese teachers in big universities. Furthermore, they also learn certain aspects of a foreign culture from the Amity teachers. This helps them to build up confidence in their language skills, and meanwhile, provides them with an equal opportunity to develop their professional skills.

Many universities in China can now afford their own foreign teachers. Why is Amity still placing foreign teachers in schools?

Generally speaking, today big colleges in the eastern part of China have more resources and enough funds to hire their own foreign teachers. Meanwhile, most of the small teachers’ colleges in the western part of China are still struggling to get foreign teachers. There are two main reasons for this phenomenon. Number one, these smaller teachers’ colleges...
lack an international network which could help them recruit qualified teachers. They have few if any connections with other colleges and universities in foreign countries. Number two, some of these colleges do not have enough funds to hire their own qualified foreign teachers even if they could find them.

Teaching conditions for Amity teachers have changed over the last two decades. What does it take to become an Amity teacher today?

Living in small cities where we place most of our teachers is still a challenge. It is still common for schools located in small cities, let’s say in Gansu, to suffer from power cuts from time to time. Black-outs happen about once or twice a week. We are told that in some of those schools, power cuts also affect the supply of running water because the pumps run on electricity on the campuses where the Amity teachers are living.

There are still problems with the language barrier, as well. In big cities in China, there are quite a few English speakers today. But people in the small cities of the western part of China are still struggling with English. Foreign teachers placed there are expected to accept quite a few inconveniences in their daily lives.

In order to become an Amity teacher, a person has to be committed to the teaching work and to the students, and should be a good team player. Of course there are also a few requirements from the Chinese government. For instance, foreigners who want to teach in China need to be college graduates, having two years of teaching experience or holding specific teaching certificates.

What changes have been made to the Amity Teachers Program?

The Amity Teachers Program has kept changing in order to keep up with the developments in China. When Amity set up the program in 1985, we placed teachers only in the key universities in big cities. At that time, even the key universities didn’t have the necessary resources to hire foreign teachers. After a few years, those key schools gained the ability to cultivate their own resources, and Amity changed the target group to small teachers training colleges in the eastern part of China. From the late 1990s, Amity has been sending teachers to the western part of China where a high level of need still remains.

This year, Amity made additional upgrades to the Teachers Program. We added the “3 in 1” project. This means that Amity teachers have three responsibilities in their teaching area: 1. teaching Chinese students at their host schools who will be English teachers; 2. helping with the language proficiency of their Chinese colleagues, and 3. providing language training for middle school English teachers in their local communities. Let me explain in detail. Under this new project, Amity teachers will not just serve students and teachers in their host schools but also help local English teachers, especially middle school teachers from those communities, to improve their language skills. Most middle school English teachers in small cities of western China have no opportunity to get further training and keep up with the developments in English teaching. This new approach of helping local middle school English teachers has been well received.

When we choose partner schools today, we pay a lot of attention to whether or not the schools are willing to go along with the “3 in 1” program. For instance, Amity used to only encourage teaching cooperation between Amity teachers and their colleagues at the colleges. As a result, some schools did not make any arrangements for Amity teachers to work with Chinese colleagues even when they felt it would be helpful for the improvement of the English teaching of both Chinese teachers and Amity teachers alike. Today, this kind of cooperation is an obligatory part of the program for all our partner schools.

At the same time, Amity also emphasizes that the foreign teacher is not the only one who can help with improving the language proficiency of the local middle school teachers. We now encourage that together with Amity teachers, the Chinese teachers from partner colleges should also provide professional training to English teachers in local middle schools in areas they are good at. When we decide to work with a new school, we first check to see if the college has
a program where it helps the local middle schools. It seems that right now we are one of the few NGOs in China which encourages this peer-to-peer teaching among Chinese teachers. Meanwhile, this element also helps our program become more sustainable because helping local middle school teachers does not rely only on the foreign teachers.

**What do you expect from Amity’s overseas partners?**

I would like to call on our friends from overseas partners for their continuing support for the Teachers Program in order to eventually help millions of Chinese students in the west part of China with their education. Of course, I realize that many partner organizations are facing funding cuts. We are going to try out new ways of gaining financial support from partner schools in China. We are exploring ways we can work together with our host schools to see if they might be able to cover part of the expenses for our foreign teachers. In this way, we hope we will be able to lower the costs which currently need to be covered by our overseas partner agencies.

We hope that the financial situation of China’s higher education will change for the better so that the schools hosting Amity teachers can gradually contribute more to the Amity Teachers Program.

**What was the most rewarding experience for you in the past years?**

To work with so many committed Amity teachers from different cultural backgrounds who live their faith in action has been a privilege for me. Another rewarding experience for me has been to be involved in establishing Amity’s other cultural exchange programs based on my past years’ experience in working with the Amity Teachers Program. What makes me so satisfied is that nowadays, those newly developed culture-exchange programs make it possible for more people, in particular young people from overseas, to come to this country to study Chinese, to learn about Chinese culture, to live an ordinary Chinese life and to get to know more and more people in China.

---

**Service Learning for United World College Students**

**Song of Sadness in a Model Village**

by Han Tsoi

“The moon weaves through the clouds like through a sea of white lotus. The evening breeze carries with it peals of happy tunes. We sit by the hay bales and listen as Mother tells stories from the past …”

A little boy started singing in the dusk. The vastness of crop fields was his backdrop and the courtyard of a farmhouse his stage. A dozen villagers had gathered to watch a performance by some student visitors from a faraway place: Hong Kong. It wasn’t a bad turnout for La Qia Fan Village considering it was a market day.

The performance was an eclectic mix of pop music, ethnic dance and educational drama, which the students had rehearsed diligently in the hotel lobby the previous night. The villagers had come to see “foreigners” — different hair colors, eye colors, darker or lighter complexions, all in flesh.

Children, too, were recruited as audience on their way home from school. Curious and excited, they popped their heads in, fluttered across the courtyard and settled on the wooden stools like sparrows on branches. Each still had an oversize schoolbag on his back.

When the performance ended, a few women nudged the children to perform something in return as a gesture of friendliness. After some pushing and pulling, the little boy came forward. A middle-aged woman then led him by the hand to the clearing of the courtyard, where he was to sing us a song.

The eight-year-old looked too small for his age and too frail for the evening wind. Unlike his playmates, he was not wearing anything colorful. He was just a skinny frame underneath a dull, dirty outfit. And yet, in his bright eyes no trails of timidity could be found.

He started singing with a gentle voice, a voice half eaten by the wind. Unlike his playmates, he was not wearing anything colorful. He was just a skinny frame underneath a dull, dirty outfit. And yet, in his bright eyes no trails of timidity could be found.

And before the chorus, tears had streaked down his cheeks, “…back in those days, Mama……”

The boy sang on with a strange
determination. The middle-aged woman was trying to wipe tears off his face. Now the other half of his voice was eaten by the whimpering, as if it were some faint cries from distant fields. For a while we thought he cried because he was too nervous. The woman explained later that the boy’s mother used to sing this song to him. He had seven siblings who all died at a tender age due to poor health. He’s now the only child left his parents, who are too old to work.

The little boy continued to weep after returning to the crowd. Some students went up to him, stooped over and said a few words. Some stood at a distance and looked his way once or twice. Others went about putting props and equipments away. I heard a voice mumble, “Life is unfair.”

The owner of the house mobilized his family and helpers into setting the tables for dinner. Some villagers left. A few children lingered on, among them, the little boy. His weeping subsided in to a gentle sniffle as he weaved in and out the steaming flow that brought dishes to the tables. Night had fallen. We ate and left the village.

For the rest of the trip, nobody mentioned the little boy. I guess for some of us, response eluded us. For others, it was not worth further thoughts. We had traveled all the way from Hong Kong to see poverty and hardship. We saw them in those shabby villages. But we weren’t quite prepared for some displaced misery in an episode titled the “model village.”

What could we possibly have said or done that would make it okay for the little boy and his family? How much do we really understand their pain? What does it mean to be as privileged as being a student of a United World College—receiving the best possible elite pre-university education? This was the first time I co-led a service learning trip for a group of students from Li Po Chun United World College (HK). I couldn’t help but wonder what it meant to be privileged. Does it mean living inside a bubble and bouncing around encapsulated when one goes on a service learning trip?

For hunger, thirst, lack of health care and environmental problems, we could always come up with projects, big projects. For what we’ve inadvertently taken away, we could try to compensate. But there was something so utterly inconsolable about what the little boy’s family had suffered, something so irreparable about their brokenness that I was once again lost in the loss itself.

Nothing really synchronizes the heartbeats of humanity like senseless suffering. If in our coming and going, we allow ourselves to take in silently a scene like this (which I believe some of us did) and if we dare to let it do to us what it does, then we too have wiped tears off the little boy’s face just as the middle-aged woman did when he was singing in the dusk.

Han Tsoi is a new staff at the Amity Hong Kong office. She assists in project management. Before joining Amity in fall 2009, Han graduated from United World College of the Adriatic (Italy) and Macalester College in Minnesota, U.S.A.

News

Jiangsu Christian Charity Fund

New Fund Strengthens Ties Between Amity and the Church

Conflict resolution and the construction of a harmonious environment in the church were the main topics of a capacity building seminar in November. It was hosted by the US-based Plowshares Institute and the Jiangsu Christian Charity Fund. The seminar focused on developing the management skills of forty church workers from different parts of Jiangsu.

The Jiangsu Christian Charity Fund was established as a joint initiative of the Amity Foundation and the Jiangsu Christian Council in March 2009 with the aim of developing social services offered by the Christian community in Jiangsu Province according to the principles of Amity. As the Chinese church has developed, more and more churches have become involved in providing social services to underprivileged social groups. The church in Jiangsu has been involved in running homes for the elderly or providing medical services in church-run clinics.

The Jiangsu Christian Charity Fund aims to develop the church’s social service; to enhance the positive role of the Protestant church in the socioeconomic development of the country; and to achieve the harmonious development of the church in society.

www.amityfoundation.org
A new center for training people who work in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) opened in October 2009. The so-called “Incubator” was jointly founded by Amity, the Nanjing Bureau of Civil Affairs and the Jianye District Administration to promote the growth of civil society, to build the capacity of NGO staff, and to explore new ways on how social welfare can be expanded in society.

The move follows a government initiative to improve the quality and capacity of various social service providers and development organizations in the region. In recent years, local governments have been handing over public social services to non-governmental or semi-governmental organizations, and visited the Amity Social Service Center (picture above). At the end of the Round Table Meeting, many participants traveled to the region devastated by the May 2008 Mianzhu earthquake to witness Amity’s reconstruction efforts in the area.

The Incubator is seen as an efficient tool to raise standards in care-giving and developmental work because Amity, which is mainly responsible for the training content, can draw on a long history of experience in this field. Amity staff and guest speakers offer training sessions on a great range of different topics, including strategic planning, teamwork, management, evaluation and NGO-media relations, among others. NGO staff who apply for participating in a training course are selected through a strict assessment procedure. So far, four training courses have been completed.

Amity is determined to convince them of the contrary.