

Jimmy Domingo



The Amity Foundation says that China's orphanages lack funds but they're never short of concern for their wards.

THE AMITY FOUNDATION STATEMENT

The Other Side of the Story

(Editor's note: The Human Rights Report *"Death by Default" - China State Orphanages* also spoke about the deaths of girl children in China's orphanages. We could not reprint the whole report here—it's a whole book—but since we reprinted "The Dying Rooms," we decided to run Amity Foundation's statement in the spirit of balanced reporting.)

Recently, the Amity Foundation has received a number of inquiries about our work with orphanages. These have been in response to a report published by Human Rights Watch/Asia which documents serious problems in Chinese orphanages in general, and the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute in particular. Unfortunately, this report makes sweeping judgements about the general situation in China, employing highly charged rhetoric but failing to substantiate many claims.

The Amity Foundation has tried, over the years, to address the problems of orphans and orphanages in China in a concrete way. Mr. Ting Yenren, Associate General Secretary of the Amity Foundation, made the following comments.

1. While we at Amity and many others in China are calling for increased government funding for orphanages, the Human Rights Watch report claims that orphanage

jobs are high-paying and people land there through good connections. At the same time, it causes some staff of Shanghai Orphanage of committing what it terms intentional "summary resolution" and gives readers the impression that deliberately allowing infants to die is a wide-spread practice in China. In so doing, the report changes the issue of funding shortage into one of a criminal case and actually puts the government entirely out of the picture. Since the funding shortage will only perpetuate the difficulties China's orphanages are faced with, we have serious doubts about the true motive of the Human Rights Watch report.

As for the charge of "summary resolution," although we do not know the actual situation at Shanghai Orphanage, we cannot believe that the social workers we have come to know through working with various orphanages over the years would share such criminal intention.

2. Orphanages in China are in great need of help, both from within China and without. The Human Rights Watch report, however, distorts the reality that one of the basic problems

with China's welfare work is insufficient funding from the government. This is also a problem that schools and medical clinics face at the grassroots level. The funding shortage not only results in dilapidated facilities, but also dampens staff morale to various degrees.

The staff at an orphanage often fall in the lowest income brackets. The government, in order to raise the profile of school teachers, nurses and welfare institution staff, does have a policy of offering them higher salaries than those of other government employees with the same level of education and the same length of work experience. Even so, however, the real income of the orphanage staff is still among the lowest because, by working at a non-profit institution, they receive almost no bonuses or any other fringe benefits, whereas, for their counterparts in other institutions, government salary often makes up only a small fraction of the income.

As a result of the funding shortage, the talented among the orphanage staff may be attracted to jobs that pay better, and the ones left

behind are further looked down upon by others or by themselves as failures. Therefore, as we visit orphanages, we do from time to time find low morale and irresponsibility on the part of some staff. We can also believe that some children may die of malnutrition or the lack of adequate care. Yet this is one of the very reasons why we should work with orphanages.

This is not just Amity's assessment of the problem with China's orphanages. It is also the view shared by committed social workers in orphanages and civil affairs bureaus who are deeply concerned that they cannot offer children good care under very low budgets and that not enough young people are willing to take over their positions when they retire. In fact, the problem of funding shortages is so obvious there's no wonder why the Human Rights Watch report turns a blind eye to it.

3. Improving the work of orphanages not only requires greater funding. It also needs participatory management and the establishment of accountability. We are concerned that the Human Rights Watch report may provide the pretext for a small number of officials to go to extremes and deny demands for more participation and accountability. The report comes at a time when there is growing public concern within China, and when non-government involvement is starting to make the orphanage staff suspicious of these efforts damages our work.

These days, all of China is moving toward a market economy, and this is a mixed blessing for China's welfare institutions. On the one hand, the balance is further tilted against them because government funds are also being drained into uses that offer good profit. With inflation and tax evasion, the government is increasingly unable to provide sufficient funds for welfare institutions. On the other hand, this is also a time when we have many opportunities for substantial improvement in the work of these institutions. Thanks to the reform policy, there is more money in non-government sectors and in private

hands, some of which can be channelled into welfare work. There is also a growing public awareness of the difficulties faced by orphanages, schools and rural clinics. Pressure is building for change and improvement. Eventually, more financial and legislative measures will be taken to safeguard the rights and interests of orphans and abandoned children.

Ms. Wu An'an, in charge of Amity's Social Welfare Division, adds to this:

It is not enough to just talk about the situation in the Chinese orphanages. Even more importantly, the root cause of the current problems needs to be addressed. Most of the children in the orphanages are there because they have been abandoned by their parents, either because they are girls or because they are sick or handicapped. To highlight this problem, Amity, together with Shanghai Television 2, produced a documentary about a Chinese couple who had found and raised more than 20 abandoned children. This film, produced in 1989, was subsequently shown on several local and provincial TV stations in China. The documentary was meant to educate the Chinese public about the situation of abandoned children, and it appealed to parents to take responsibility for their own children and not to abandon them. (For further information, see Amity Newsletter No.14, Autumn 1990.)

When we first approached Nanjing Orphanage 10 years ago, the situation there was very bad. Children were poorly clothed and fed; the staff had poor working skills and lacked enthusiasm, resulting in a lack of care for the children. There were also administrative problems. This is why Amity wanted to help.

Today things have changed dramatically. Amity sponsored a rehabilitation section at the orphanage, and seconded one American-trained Hongkong therapist to get it going. This project exclusively served children in the orphanage, not self-paying patients. Since the rehabilitation section was set up in the orphanage, the Nanjing Rehabilitation Center for Disabled Children has started to open their services to

orphan children also, something that had not happened before. The treatment of these children is paid for by donations from some local organizations.

In addition to the rehabilitation section, Amity set up a volunteer program, called the "Grandmother Program," at the Nanjing Orphanage. Four retired nurses and doctors from Nanjing were sponsored by Amity to work at the orphanage five days a week, training staff and improving the care of the children. These "grandmothers," who were there on a day-to-day basis, have told me many times how things have improved at the orphanage. (For more detailed reports about Amity's involvement with Chinese orphanages, see Amity Newsletter Nos. 19, 20, 25 and 30.)

Amity has now terminated its assistance for the orphanage in Nanjing, as there are now plenty of voluntary workers, as well as individuals and institutions who regularly give donations. Many families have "adopted" children, that is they regularly take them out for short trips or meals, even though they cannot legally adopt them.

Our Grandmother Program, on the other hand, has now been extended to four more orphanages: Yangzhou, Wuxi, Changzhou and Shanghai.

Amity has also tried to raise awareness of the orphanage situation among church workers. Students from the Nanjing Theological Seminary, organized by Amity, have visited the Nanjing orphanage, and have been encouraged to get involved in orphanages in the places where they will be working as pastors.

The Amity Foundation has always believed in changing things by doing something about them.

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New Books on WOMEN AND THE UN

One of the positive outcomes from recent world conferences organized by the UN is the wealth of information presented in such gatherings. Often conscientiously organized in the form of books, conference proceedings serve as valuable tools for analysis and action. Examples of such are two current publications.

The first one is the book *Women and the United Nations: Reflections and New Horizons*. Edited by Filomena C. Steady and Remie Toure, this book addresses timely questions such as: How beneficial have UN programs been for women in the developing world? How must the UN change to make future programs more effective? What do the experiences of women working within the UN system tell us about the UN's commitment to gender equity? Compiled in this book are the papers and statements presented at the Forum of Women Professionals organized by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in Vienna in May 1995. The seminar was one of the activities that marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of the UN and also served as a preparatory activity for the Fourth World Conference on Women.

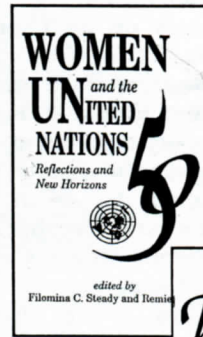
The second book, also edited by Filomena C. Steady, *Women and Children First: Environment, Poverty and Sustainable Development* is an anthology of papers presented at the symposium "Women and Children First: The Impact of Poverty and Environmental Degradation

on Women and Children" held in Geneva in May 1991. These essays were among the earliest substantive inputs into the policy considerations of governments in preparation for the Earth Summit. They also served as lobbying tools for the incorporation of the needs, concerns and aspirations of women and children in Agenda 21, the programme of action that came out of the Earth Summit.

The book hopes to be able to enrich the discourse on the role of gender and age in the distribution, management and protection of natural resources. Moreover, it aims to highlight the importance of ensuring a central role for women and children in policies and programs designed to promote sustainable development.

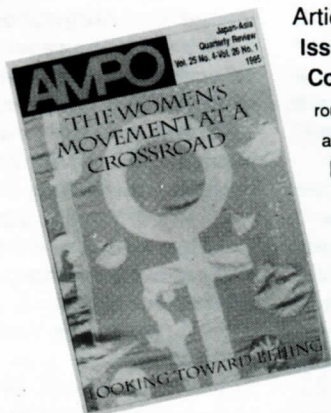
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