

# Rolling Out the Dough

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Women's Feature Service

XIAMEN—Until 1989, Yang Meiyu, a middle-aged working woman in China's southeast Fujian Province, had been living frugally on her small salary.

Like many ordinary Chinese, she never anticipated that China's economic restructuring could affect her so abruptly as it did in the late 1970s when the country began following a policy of reform and opened its doors to free trade.

Upon graduating from high school in the late 1960s, she worked at various odd jobs before being recruited as a cook to the Chemical Industry Bureau's factory canteen. Eight years later, she was transferred to the company's guesthouse, and within seven years she worked her way up from cook to manager.

For Meiyu, married with two children, everything seemed to be going well. Then the guesthouse closed and the staff was dismissed due to an economic reshaping in late 1989. At 42, Meiyu found herself unemployed and seemingly unwanted.

"I tried to seek a job at the old factory where I worked eight years, but I was turned down," she recalls. "The factory was over staffed."

Without the security of a job, Meiyu says it was as if a wall she had always relied upon collapsed. Her income had been the sole support of her family of five, including an

elderly mother, unemployed husband and two kids in school.

"I felt I was betrayed by life and had become an outcast," she says. "I had devoted all my youth to work, then I suddenly found myself redundant and a loser. I was totally unprepared for the bitter experience. In despair, I thought of committing suicide."

But out of love for her family and a sense of obligation to them, she pulled

herself out of this depression. Now at 49, Meiyu is the owner of a fast food chain—the Youli Fastfood Ltd. Co.—with fixed assets of US\$360,000.00, five stores and a staff of 72.

Meiyu says the turning point in her life came when she was laid off and she went to the local trade union to complain about her unemployment due to the reforms.

"People there tried their best to soothe me, and suggested that I start some



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small business by myself," she says. "They kindly explained the policies and regulations concerning the setup and operation of a private business, and encouraged me to have a try."

Meiyu was inspired. She realised that her experience as a cook and manager could help her run a small business selling snacks such as dumplings and buns. Borrowing US\$960 from friends, she set up a 16-square-meter shop making and selling fastfood. The shop was named Youli, meaning "benefits from friends."

"It was really a hard beginning," reminisces Meiyu. "Every morning I got up at three o'clock to knead dough, mix fillings and steam buns."

When business slowed down, Meiyu would hawk her baked goodies on the street. "That was quite trying," she says, "especially when I bumped into acquaintances who laughed at me as if I were begging."

Despite the small size of her business, Meiyu stuck to her own creed of being honest and never selling stale food. If there was a surplus, she took it home to her family.

Her delicious home-made snacks and enthusiastic service became well known in the neighbourhood, and gradually her business grew.

In 1993, she expanded her snackbar into a fastfood store, serving rice and other dishes. Then in March of 1995, she established her chain of stores beginning with three. But she soon saw the demand for more and added another two.

One of her stores is located at the Huli New Zone, an area

where new factories and joint ventures are being built daily. Meiyu saw the potential market for her quick lunch foods, and as soon as she had the economic strength, she invested US\$60,000 to set up the store. The Huli store proved a good investment, raking in nearly US\$840 daily.

Meiyu runs her fastfood chain her own way. In the morning, she sells snacks; at lunch, she provides fastfood. Meiyu and her employees don't have an idle moment in their day. In the afternoon they produce frozen snacks for the Xiamen market. Every year, her company turns out about 20,000 bags of quick-frozen dumplings as its sideline production.

As the business expanded, her husband and college-educated son and son-in-law joined her in managing the chain stores. But there are still things that Meiyu insists on doing herself.

Every morning, she personally goes to the market to do the shopping. Usually, she needs 500 kg of rice, 200 kg of meat and 500 kg of vegetables for the daily supply of the chain stores.

"To guarantee the quality of our food, I make sure that we use fresh meat and vegetables, so I buy them everyday," she says. She purchases directly from farmers, paying 15 percent less than the market rate. By doing so, she manages to keep prices stable in her stores.

From Meiyu's shops, a diner can have a nice lunch of two hot dishes, a bowl of soup and a bowl of rice for around US\$1.20.

"The price here is quite reasonable," says Xiao Zhang,

a 20-year old worker at a factory near Meiyu's store in Huli. "There are some cheaper stores around but their quality is no match for Auntie Yang's. Lunching here is a kind of enjoyment."

Another principle Meiyu has set for her stores is sanitation. "Sanitation of the food and environment is what I care for most," she says. All her employees receive medical check-ups before being hired and 15 days training before starting work. Each store is equipped with a sterilizing machine to ensure clean utensils.

Sometimes Meiyu invests in what seems to be a lost cause, such as the contract for the operation of the Songbai High School canteen in 1995.

Impressed by Meiyu's reputation, the school's headmaster approached her with a request of helping him open a canteen in his school. "Ours is among the top schools in Xiamen, and I wanted our canteen to be first rate as well," he told Meiyu.

Meiyu didn't let him down. Her fastfood made the canteen the most popular among high schools in the city. But because she had cut her prices by one third to help them out, she began to lose nearly US\$480 each month.

But Meiyu has her own way of counting. "What I've scored from the Songbai canteen is more than money. Its prestige can bring me more chances in business," she says.

Meiyu knows the value of money, but doesn't think that money is everything, it's more a matter of hard work and being able to earn your own way in this world.