

▶ Engineer Dave Feickert on saving the lives of China's miners



By Liu Xuan

Deep in a coalmine in Inner Mongolia, an orange-clad figure peers into the gloom, looking for traces of his enemies: Poisonous and explosive gases; evidence of mine collapse and flooding; the danger of dust explosions.

At the beginning of each trip down the pit, miners across the world cross their fingers to pray for safety. At the end of each day, in China alone, on average 40 miners will be injured or worse. With 35 percent of global coal resources, China has nearly 80 percent of the total deaths in worldwide coalmines. It's a grim statistic that New Zealander Dave Feickert is fighting to change.

"Throughout the world, mine workers...are threatened by the same perils," says Feickert, who gives the simplest definition of his profession as "to ensure that when coal miners go to work in the morning or evening, they come back home without injuries."

With 30 years of experience in the field, since 2004, Feickert has been working alongside the Chinese Bureau of Coal Mining Safety in Beijing and at the coalface to improve safety regulations and practices. In 2009, he was awarded the Friendship Award, the highest award foreigners can receive in China to recognize his contribution to the improvement of coalmine safety.

It's become something of a family tradition: His brother, agricultural expert Peter Feickert won the same award 11 years ago. The brothers, hailing from a Quaker family in

At the coalface

Wanganui, on the North Island of New Zealand, are among 11 of their fellow compatriots to have been bestowed the honor.

High mortality

In 2002, the mortality rate of coal miners hit a new peak: 7,000 deaths. At the time, Feickert was an official in coalmine safety for the European Union based in Brussels. Reading a report, Feickert was struck by the high figure. "As a coal safety expert, I know that if the mortality rate is 7,000, then people who are seriously injured, sent into hospital and thrown out of the industry must be around 30,000, normally four or five times more," he says.

Feickert felt that there had to be something he could do to help. "There is nothing more fundamental than the right not to be killed or injured at work," he says.

His brother's long-standing involvement with China led to a way in. Peter Feickert worked in the mountainous Liangshan area of Sichuan, an Yi minority area. He helped to introduce modern methods of animal husbandry specific to high altitudes to help in poverty reduction amongst the local Yi.

"Because of Peter's *guanxi* with China, in 2004 I was able to talk with the Chinese Ambassador to New Zealand and introduce to him what I could do as a coal mining expert," says Feickert.

Feickert's interest in China



Training in New Zealand.

Photos: Courtesy of Dave Feickert

was sparked 40 years ago, when as a college student he was inspired by meeting people who had lived and worked in China, including legendary New Zealand journalist James Bertram, the Chinese-speaking son of missionaries. Although the brothers' interests in agriculture and industry couldn't be further apart, "both of us hold a similar outlook from our Quaker religious beliefs," he says.

In Winter 2004, Feickert arrived in China to "make a contribution to China's sustainable development." Having worked with coal miners all over the world, Feickert sees that "Chinese coal miners' working lives are so similar to their Western counterparts and the risks they face, while higher, are very similar."

Through working with them, Feickert says he finds the coal miners of China to be "truly admirable."

"In fact, they are among the best men in the world. I was often touched by their bravery resilient humor, and being so supportive to one another," he continues. "They are used to working in teams, and team working has become their surviving principle."

Fragmented industry

It hasn't been easy for Feickert. On one side is the highly fragmented coal mining industry with "well-developed national-owned mines," surrounded by "thousands and thousands of private mines which are literally often just a hole in the ground." On the other side, Chinese coal mining safety experts are "too often inclined to try to find an engineering solution to all problems."

"Of course," says Feickert, "In the real world, life is more complicated sometimes." Feickert has found it hard to introduce European standards to such a working environment.

Practical solutions he advocates include stressing the importance of risk assessments before each shift goes underground, and emphasizing safety management procedures that need to involve all workers.

For five years and on over a hundred different occasions, Feickert has campaigned for an organizational improvement paralleling advances in engineering, "among all levels

of coalmine workers from coal diggers to general managers."

Despite the headlines, which may seem completely to the contrary, the years from 2002-2009 witnessed a big leap in China's coal mining safety. On average the daily death rate dropped from 19.1 to 7.2, while expansion in the industry more than doubled.

Feickert doesn't live full-time in China, dividing his time between here, his native New Zealand, and lecturing on mine safety around the world. After receiving the Friendship Award last autumn, he said, "If I were a 30-year-old, this is the country where I would want to live, work and experience the re-creation of an ancient civilization as a modern, forward-looking and dynamic economy."

He may be passing his dreams on to his daughter Sonia. A health expert, who graduated from Cambridge University, Sonia has been working with Save the Children in Malawi. She has been considering coming to join her father in China, working on improving occupational health, especially lung diseases in miners, like pneumoconiosis.

In the meantime, Feickert remains optimistic that there can continue to be improvements in one of China's deadliest industries.

"What I have learned in my working life is two things: There is almost always a solution to any problem and second, that if you never give up, stay positive, and believe in fellow humans, then you will generally help to find it," he says.

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