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Spotlight: Interviews with American Documentarians Exploring China's War on Poverty

By Julia Pierrepont III

Los Angeles. August 8 (Xinhua) Hosted and written by Robert Lawrence Kuhn of the Kuhn Foundation, directed by Emmy-nominated, Peter Getzels, with stunning cinematography by Ning Nan, "Voices From the Frontline: China's War on Poverty," the documentary, was premiered on PBS.com this past week.

The film gives Western viewers a rare glimpse behind the curtain into the internal workings of one of China's most important government programs: President Xi Jinping's Poverty Alleviation Program.

"The documentary provides a textured and intimate portrayal of China's historic anti-poverty campaign by following six cases that highlight China's poverty alleviation strategy," says PBS.

The PBS premiere marks the first time a major American network has covered the inside story of China's ambitious race to eradicate all extreme poverty by 2020.

Xinhua caught up with the film's award-winning writer/host, Robert Lawrence Kuhn, and director, Peter Getzels, for exclusive interviews after the premiere.

A renaissance man of international renown, Kuhn is an investment banker and longtime writer/host of PBS's hit "Closer to Truth" series in which he interviews the world's greatest minds in science, philosophy, religion and more.

He is also a China expert and 30-year advisor to China on matters of high finance, corporate strategy and international policy; the author of "How China's Leaders Think" and bestseller, "The Man Who Changed China: The Life and Legacy of Jiang Zemin"; and recipient of China's highest international honor, the "China Reform Friendship Medal," which has been awarded to only ten foreigners in four decades.

As the host of over 400 hours of in-depth television interviews, Kuhn is known for his dry, self-deprecating humor and for asking the sort of deep, probing questions that cut straight to the heart of the matter.

“To truly understand China, one has to recognize their genuine commitment to eradicate poverty,” Kuhn told Xinhua.

“Today, in the Western world, especially in the U.S., there is concern about China's actions and suspicion of China's motives,” Kuhn explained. “But one of the things I wanted this film to do was to undermine the stereotype of China as a ruthless giant out to dominate the world. It’s just not the case. Their focus is still inward on eradicating poverty, something the US has yet to do.”

He explained to Xinhua that while China’s economic stimulus package was an unprecedented success that lifted over 700 million Chinese out of poverty, by 2012, when President Xi Jinping came to power, it had become clear that there were still millions of intractably poor that no amount of economic stimulus could reach: those in extremely remote mountain villages, those who were infirm, those with no education, etc.

“While China’s future growth could make the rich richer, it would never make the poorest less poor,” Kuhn explained. “What was to be done about *them*?”

He was fascinated that Xi Jinping’s solution was to create a massive, highly targeted, individual poverty alleviation program. Like no other on earth, China’s program was based on crafting an individual plan for *every single family* below the poverty line, then having them visited every month by a young party member who helps them implement new strategies to increase their income.

In the film, Lu Chunseng, Director of the Information Center, State Council Office of Poverty Alleviation, walked Kuhn through the system.

“The national system covers almost 100,000,000 people and keeps changing,” explained Director Lu. “It tracks those who have been lifted out of poverty and those that are still impoverished or newly identified as impoverished.”

Each family’s customized plan is tracked individually on an interactive map in the director’s office that spans all of China, with the poorer areas marked in shades of red, the more prosperous in pink.

While maintaining a healthy, academic skepticism about the more negative aspects of China’s authoritarian system, Kuhn was impressed by the sheer scope and determination of their poverty alleviation program, and the humanitarian intention behind it.

“One of the advantages of a top-down political system is that when President Xi Jinping wants something done – and done quickly – everyone jumps to it,” Kuhn told Xinhua.

“Since China’s targeted poverty initiative began, 3 million cadre officials have been mobilized and, today, 775,000 are still hard at work. As of 2019, through their efforts, China’s poverty level has dropped to less than 20 million,” he

affirmed.

Lingmen Village's First Party Secretary, Huang Haijun, of Qiongzong Province, Hainan, explains their motivation, "It is the essence of party principles to be people-centered," he remonstrates. "As individuals, it's something we should do for conscience sake. If you see somebody leading a wretched life and you have the ability to help him, shouldn't you?" the young man cajoles with a smile.

The film's director, Peter Getzels, an award-winning documentary filmmaker and 2-time Emmy nominee, found shooting the film to be a profound experience.

"What you learn as a documentary filmmaker is that there are so many different ways to understand things. Everyone has their own fascinating perspective," he told Xinhua.

"For the film, we decided to take a more observational approach, not a journalistic one that would be mired in journalist arguments," he explained. "We wanted to tell the story from the different perspectives of everyone we met, from high-ranking officials all the way down to the families of the poor themselves."

"It turned out to be much more personal and nuanced," he added with satisfaction.

The film's striking cinematography, with its images of steep mountain passes shrouded in mist, flickering cookfires, steaming tea kettles, and slanting sunsets over tranquil ponds, was an arresting counterpoint to the fierce struggle it takes to survive in rural poverty in China.

Getzels had nothing but praise for his creative team, including his Chinese Director of Photography, Ning Nan, and his American editor, Catherine Shields, another veteran of PBS's Closer to Truth series.

"Cathy is an extraordinary editor I have been fortunate to work with for over 12 years who understands great storytelling. Ning was truly brilliant and showed great sensitivity toward our subjects. I'd work with him again anywhere in the world."

He concurred with Kuhn's assessment that China's genuine desire to solve their poverty problem has prompted them to come up with their current ambitious and visionary approach.

But can China meet their goal of eradicating all extreme poverty in China by 2020?

State Council director Liu Yongfu is confident they can cross that finish line in time. "Our goal is explicit, our targets are clear, our determination is great. We are serious about getting results."

Kuhn is bullish as well. "China's President Xi Jinping has targeted poverty as his top priority. He's openly said he's spent more energy on poverty alleviation than anything else. It's his signature program and he is staking his political capital on its success."