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Spotlight: American documentarians explore China's war on poverty

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by Julia Pierrepont III

LOS ANGELES, Aug. 11 (Xinhua) -- Hosted and written by Robert Lawrence Kuhn of the Kuhn Foundation, and directed by award-winning director Peter Getzels, "Voices From the Frontline: China's War on Poverty" was premiered on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) on July 31.

Through SoCal, the Los Angeles-based PBS flagship station which reaches 19 million diverse viewers across Southern California, the documentary gives Western audience a rare glimpse into the internal workings of the poverty alleviation program, one of China's most important government programs.

"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," said the Kuhn Foundation in a statement.

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.

A renaissance man of international renown, Kuhn is an investment banker and longtime writer and 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. Besides, he is a recipient of "China Reform Friendship Medal," China's highest international honor 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 deep and 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 after the premiere.

"Today, in the Western world, especially in the United States, 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 U.S. has yet to do."

He explained that while China's economic stimulus package was an unprecedented success, it had become clear by 2013 when President Xi Jinping took office, that there were still millions of intractably poor that no amount of economic stimulus could reach, such as those in extremely remote mountain villages and with no education.

Kuhn was fascinated that China'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.

Kuhn was impressed by the sheer scope and determination of China's poverty alleviation program, and the humanitarian intention behind it.

"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.

The film's director Getzels, an award-winning documentary filmmaker and two-time Emmy nominee, found shooting the film 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 concurred with Kuhn's assessment that China's genuine desire to address poverty has prompted it to come up with its current ambitious and visionary approach.

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

Liu Yongfu, director of the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, 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, explaining that China has regarded eradicating poverty as one of its top priorities.

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