

CGTN AMERICA

The Heat: China's War on Poverty

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CGTN HOST ANAND NAIDOO: China's war on poverty. It is extraordinary how China is eradicating poverty. Hello. I'm Anand Naidoo and this is The Heat. Over the last 40 years, China has lifted more than 700 million people out of poverty. And this year, China's President Xi Jinping has set a goal for the country to end extreme poverty. But behind these statistics, there are real people, rural workers, struggling for a better life. Young women who want a college education. Families adjusting to relocation.

Longtime China watcher Robert Lawrence Kuhn, and award-winning director Peter Getzels got a unique look at how China is accomplishing its poverty eradication mission. They tell that story in the documentary, "*Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty*". Watch this.



**KUHN
VOICEOVER:
I've
negotiated
unprecedented
access to
travel across
China, taking a
small
international
film crew. To
speak with
premolars,
villagers,
party
contraries,
local officials,
third party
monitors,
those being
lifted out of
poverty. Those
assigned to do
the lifting. And
those were
recruited to do
the checking.
These are the
people on the
front lines of
China's war on
povert**



CGTN HOST: It's my pleasure now to talk with Robert Lawrence Kuhn, the host and writer of *China's War on Poverty*. He joins us from Los Angeles via Skype. Also joining us is Peter Getzels. He is the director of the documentary and he joins us via Skype from West Virginia. Welcome to both of you to the show.

Robert, you've been following China's poverty alleviation efforts for decades. Right now, as I said, it's lifted 700 million Chinese people out of poverty. This documentary is a very personal look. What did you want the documentary to capture about China's war on poverty?



ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN; I've been working in and with China for more than 30 years. I have focused, as most people know, on Chinese politics, on China's extraordinary economic development. My particular interest has been the development of Chinese science and technology. Poverty alleviation, for the first 30 years of reform and opening up beginning in 1978, was really not a priority of the Chinese government for the simple reason that economic development was. And the extraordinary lifting out of poverty, over the first 30 years, of some 500, 600 million people, brought about because of economic development. The theory that a high tide lifts all boats. If you grow the economy, people will get out of poverty. Migrant workers coming to cities making much more money than they made on the farms, though still low wages by international standards. And it was an extraordinary success.



KUHN: But here's what happened sometime around 10 years ago, and certainly accelerated when President Xi Jinping became senior leader of the country in late 2012 as general secretary of the CPC. The realization occurred that there were about 100 million Chinese people who, no matter how much the country would continue to develop, no matter how much the GDP per capita would continue to increase, these roughly 100 million people would still remain in poverty, no matter what China's development would be. Most of them were living in remote mountainous villages. Some had a very poor education. Some couldn't even speak Mandarin (they were from different ethnic groups). Some people were infirm. So this was the realization: that there were 100 million people who would never get out of poverty — and therefore the great vision that China has had for these two centennial goals, as it's described, the first being a "moderately prosperous society" (小康社会), which will come into fruition this year, in 2020, because next year is the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China.



KUHN: So that was the symbolic reason. But President Xi recognized that China couldn't claim to have a "moderately prosperous society," no matter how big the GDP was, no matter how prominent China was in the world, no matter how high the GDP per capita was, if there was a single person remaining in extreme poverty. And so, therefore, what he decided to do was to have a "targeted poverty alleviation program", which would specifically focus on this 100 million through a whole series of things. And that's what we had the opportunity to follow.

CGTN HOST: All right. Let's bring in Peter, the director of the film. Peter, you directed this documentary. You had extraordinary access. You were able to tell the story by meeting people. But I watched the documentary. It's not many talking heads. Tell us about the style you adopted and what you were trying to achieve.



PETER GETZELS: That's a really, really important issue. What we were really trying to do was tell the stories from the ground up. We really wanted people themselves to be able to express their experience of both those being lifted out of poverty and the young cadres going into the field and what they were doing. People at all different levels of society were all really working hard to develop this project. And the goal really was to see, could people themselves tell the story. We didn't want to create a sort of an ideological sort of journalistic piece. You really want to tell a verité or a sort of observational piece that a lot of people themselves to express their own experience.

And the goal of that was to reach across boundaries. I think that the connection, the emotional connection you have with people, with the young woman who wanted a college education and was finding her way into higher education, well, these are the kind of visceral connections that people make. And I think they work very well internationally. And my goal was to get underneath the headlines, underneath this story, and really bring out intrinsically what's going on on the ground through people's words themselves.



CGTN HOST: Robert, there is a segment in the documentary where we learn that villagers themselves have a say in who makes it out of poverty. It's quite an education. It was for me. And they do that through something called Democratic Appraisal Meetings. Let's watch.

KUHN VOICEOVER: The last step in deciding who is poor and who is not, and who could be said to have been lifted out of poverty, is what is called the "Democratic Appraisal Meeting". It's where the villagers themselves get a chance to vote. While officials may not be told the whole truth, the villagers know each other's situations.

CGTN HOST: So, Robert, tell me about the role that villagers actually play in this interaction. And also, we saw a bit of the interaction there in the documentary with officials who were in the village.



KUHN: It's a fascinating tension that exists in the village because on the one hand, people would like to be raised out of poverty because that gives them a certain status that they no longer poor. On the other hand, if they are in poverty, they get payments and subsidies. And so many times village officials have to try to find out if the families have hidden income – we show that in the documentary. So there's this tension and you see it in these Democratic Meetings. It's a remarkable situation where the people themselves really know the conditions of their fellow villagers. And so sometimes they will vote somebody into poverty who has some particular problem, maybe an illness or a problem in their family, and then vote people out of poverty when they have achieved their goal, maybe through micro business or some other activity, and this is the judgment of fellow villagers. Officials monitor this, but they give the actual decision-making capacity to the villagers themselves, who know best who is doing what.



CGTN HOST: Robert, when we look at those interactions between the villagers and officials in the village, that you captured that very well in your footage. And I'm sure many people in the West would be surprised to see that level of interaction and questioning going on between villagers and party officials. Do you think that could change popular perceptions in the West about how China is seen?

KUHN: I think that poverty alleviation in general is the very best subject to undermine biases that may be there for political reasons. Because when you understand that from President Xi on down, as President Xi has said, "I made poverty alleviation my most important task. I spend more time on poverty alleviation than on anything else." Many people in today's world would find that statement shocking. They might think Xi is worried about, you know, the South China Sea, or protecting the interests of high-level officials. But Xi has said on numerous occasions that poverty alleviation is his most important topic. And when you know the system, which is which is top down, Xi's vision filters down.



KUHN: So, the remarkable thing that we show is what happens at the lowest level, at the grassroots level, at the village level, where the officials meet the villagers. We see many young, gifted party cadres in their early thirties, who spend two years in a village — responsible for 150 or 200 families to get them out of poverty. And unless they do, they can't move from that village.

CGTN HOST: Peter, talking about filming the interaction there, I noticed that they were not the villagers are not conscious of the fact that there was a film crew right there filming these and these discussions that were taking place between officials and the villagers there. What was your feeling when you were shooting that?



GETZELS: Absolutely know that what you see is the experience we had as well. And that was really important for us. We would spend a lot of time in the field to get the interactions, the relationships. We really tried not to come in as a big crew and kind of impose ourselves in the situation, but blend into what was going on. And we spent time both on camera and off camera, sitting, talking to people, getting to know people. And that was a big part of the goal. So, in a sense, as a film crew, we became a little bit invisible. And in that way, we were able to really get a sense for what people themselves were experiencing. And it happened throughout the film. It was a really extraordinary experience and really one of the goals.

CGTN HOST: I also noticed that when you were filming the young student, a woman named Shau Jing in Gansu province, who grew up in a cave, but she was determined to go to college. Let's listen to part of that of what she had to say. Let's watch this.



CGTN HOST: You can hear the determination in her voice, that she wants to go to college. She grew up in a cave. Parents struggled. What was it like talking to her?

GETZELS: She's an extraordinary character and her parents were extraordinary parents, invited us into their home. And we spent quite a lot of time inside her home. Really having a chance to get to know them. And she was in college, both at the time I was filming in the cave situation with her family, and the crew I was working with, which were very talented from CGTN. And I spent the time interviewing her. I found that she really resonated a kind of universality that many people could connect to. And I really felt that that probably of any of the scenes in the film reached the hearts of our international viewers more than almost any other scene, because you feel, as you said, you feel the determination, you feel the passion she has.

And when you contrast her life in the university, in college, with this cave dwelling that she grew up in, and the openness with which her parents invited us in, I think it's an extraordinary experience. Very few people have been able to kind of witness that that that juxtaposition.



CGTN HOST: Right. Certainly, an extraordinary story. Robert, another way of alleviating poverty in China is, of course, relocation. Let's hear you talk about that in the documentary.

KUHN VOICEOVER: From these remote Mountain hamlets, villagers are being moved to Mingtian community, 70 kilometers away. Although poverty is being fought the world over, there is nothing anywhere like China's relocation of whole villages on a massive national scale. What might sound good in theory might not work well in practice. So I've come here to see how it works on the ground.



CGTN HOST: So, Robert, how successful are these relocation programs that entails people moving from rural areas to urban areas?

KUHN: Look, it is one of the most extraordinary elements of the Chinese system, where they are able to literally move whole villages, thousands of people. It's millions across the country. And it's done when there is absolutely no other way to lift these people out of poverty. They're in remote mountain villages. There's no access to roads. And this is the only possible way. It's just a remarkable situation.

Now, there are issues and problems with it. I mean, think of it from the male's point of view — they were the breadwinners in the village. They were the farmers. They had responsibility. They knew what they did. Now they're moving to a city. And although they're promised work and they have some guaranteed income, they're suddenly disenfranchised. They are no longer the same kind of family boss. And so they are a little bit disoriented. And so it's challenging for the government to encourage them.



KUHN: We see the job training. We followed some people learning how to be cooks and chefs. Other people are going into industry. So it is one thing to do this massive social engineering on a huge scale, which is unbelievable. It's another thing, though, to follow the people and to help them adjust to a radically different situation. From our point of view, they're far better off. But from their psychological point of view, it will take time.

CGTN HOST: Robert, the other thing is that in the last four or five months, we have had the coronavirus pandemic. How is that impacting this effort to get everyone out of poverty?

KUHN: Of course, when we started the project four or five years ago, looking at poverty, coronavirus was not on anybody's horizon. And when we finished the film, the virus still had not hit. But [now that the film is being broadcast] this created a remarkable juxtaposition because China is determined to eliminate all poverty this year. But the impact of the virus has caused serious problems, such as migrant workers remaining in villages. Villagers who built micro businesses are not able to sell as much, because people are not buying. Enormous pressure that has occurred. Local officials are focused on fighting the virus.



KUHN: So President Xi has made a commitment that no matter what, everybody has to focus on poverty alleviation, because that was the commitment of the Party.

What is particularly interesting to me now, looking at the international communications, is the fact that China's remarkable containment of the virus (even though it is not 100 percent) has been a remarkable success story, with very draconian moves in lockdowns of Hubei province, et.

It is reflective of the system. And so you can understand the way the Chinese system works with a top-down leadership, with five levels of authority in local government, with party secretaries at five levels of local government, under the central government: provincial, municipal, county, township and village. And that system, that hierarchical system that has been utilized — we show how it works in poverty alleviation. It's the same system that has been used to contain the coronavirus.

And so by understanding those two elements — containing the coronavirus and alleviating poverty rotavirus — you can infer how the Chinese system works. And you can see how poverty alleviation works in our documentary. Our documentary, fortuitous or coincidental, coming out now as a vehicle for international audiences to understand how China works.



CGTN HOST: Peter, this documentary is shown on some PBS stations here in the United States. And I have two questions. What do you hope American audiences will take away from the documentary? And would you be revisiting some of the characters that you profiled in this documentary at some later stage?

GETZELS: I really hope that people come to realize the breadth and complexion, the beauty of this activity that's going on, and the earnestness with which it's being conducted. And I really hope that they feel this connection with the people doing the work and the connection of people in China. There's such a disjunction between our perceptions in the West and what's going on in China that I hope we can use this, in a sense, to bridge the gap through connection of people. And that's one of my goals with this film.

I really, really do want to follow this process through. I would love to see how things turn out with the characters. What happens in years to come? What keeps people out of poverty? What happens if they do fall back in? These are really important questions.

CGTN HOST: This endeavor is so significant. And I think everyone in this world can learn from how China has approached poverty this in the earnestness with which they're undertaking this this great effort to get solved. Thanks to both of you for joining us.

