

CHINA REPORT 中国东盟报道

ASEAN

The UN We Need ,P46

Seeking Common Sustainable Development ,P50

Champions of Peace ,P54

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NEW BEGINNINGS

China's impending victory over poverty

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NEW BEGINNINGS

Poverty has plagued mankind for a long time. The Chinese nation has always longed to alleviate poverty. The year 2020 is the target year for China to secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and achieve the goal of complete poverty eradication. A rural population of more than 800 million formerly under the poverty line will emerge from poverty.

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Cover: Brightly-colored produce sun-dried on the roofs of farmers' houses in Wuyuan, Jiangxi Province, in the fall of 2019. (LUO JIANRONG)



A Steep Climb out of Poverty

Young Yi man etching out a better life on the cliffs

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The Biggest News Story of 21st Century

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By He Jing, Zuo Lin

On July 31, 2019, *Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty*, a documentary about China's poverty alleviation campaign, debuted on U.S. television. The production follows the inside story of China's race to eradicate all poverty by the end of 2020 through five cases.

The host and writer of the documentary, Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, a renowned China expert and recipient of the China Reform Friendship Medal, visited poor households in Guizhou, Gansu, Shanxi, Sichuan and Hainan provinces and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. He interviewed government officials at the central, provincial, city, county, township, and village levels and recorded considerable first-hand information about poverty alleviation programs.

China Report ASEAN: Why is your documentary focused on poverty alleviation in China?

Kuhn: I have been visiting China for more than 30 years, working with my long-time partner Adam Zhu to tell China's stories to the world in various forms. We have found that although China has many achievements and numerous stories to tell, none have adequately represented the real China or been as powerful in impact as China's commitment to eradicate all extreme poverty and the systematic implementation to make it happen by the end of 2020.

In practical terms, China's poverty alleviation program is the best story to offset biases and disrupt stereotypes

CHINA'S WAR ON POVERTY

“China's poverty alleviation achievements will be remembered for ages”

about China. A good part of the reason is that foreigners have very limited knowledge of China's poverty alleviation commitment and campaign or understanding of how it really works. If foreigners read anything about poverty alleviation in China, it is general and broad with big numbers such as “800 million people,” which is impressive, of course, but not emotionally moving. Truly understanding China's poverty alleviation requires hearing the stories of individual families who have emerged from poverty—that's multiple millions of stories.

Over the past 30 years, and more intensely over the past 15 years, I have traveled across China, visiting over 100 cities (and innumerable counties, townships, and villages) with Adam Zhu to research, investigate and interview for books, essays, television, and documentary productions. After all that, despite how much I thought I knew about China, I did not appreciate everything required for poverty alleviation until I started making personal visits to poor regions, especially remote mountainous villages. I found the opportunity to speak with poor villagers and hear their stories. I came to feel,

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vicariously, as if I had been part of their families and had made the poverty-alleviation journey with them.

I have also found that, surprisingly, many Chinese urbanites do not appreciate how poverty alleviation is being conducted in rural areas of their own country, particularly younger folks. In my conversations with these young people, including children of migrant workers born in major cities, I felt somewhat sad that so many had no idea of the historic transformations taking place in the villages and townships, where, not long ago, their parents lived and worked. This is why I became committed to telling China's story of poverty



Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn (LIU RONG)

alleviation to the world—including to China. This is the Chinese story I must tell.

At the same time, looking past the great good of poverty alleviation itself, deep insights can be gained into understanding how the governance structure and organizational capabilities of the Communist Party of China (CPC) enabled the poverty alleviation campaign to fulfill its mission. This is especially important at this time of heightened awareness of China's expanding role in international affairs and increasing sensitivity to it.

When China's 2020 poverty alleviation mission is completed, China will have achieved the poverty reduction goal of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 10 years early. No other country has lifted so many people out of poverty or done so in such a short period of time. When historians of the future write the chronicles of our times, a feature story will likely be China's targeted poverty alleviation. This epic achievement will be remembered for ages.

China Report ASEAN: You collected a wealth of first-hand material through your investigations. What was the most impressive story for you?

Kuhn: I travelled to Huishui County, Guizhou Province, where relocation of entire villages was underway. From remote mountain hamlets, villagers were being moved to the Mingtian community 70 kilometers away. I learned that housing was free for villagers who agreed to relocate. A family of four received up to 80 square meters of living space, 20 per person. The government also

covered all basic amenities including furniture, appliances, and electronics.

Some rural men who were farmers learned new non-farming skills, such as cooking. I got to know one former farmer who was studying to be a chef. Three generations of his family and several of his friends were appreciative of their new lives. But not everyone from the villages agreed to move to the new communities. After all, their lives have been centered on the farms for generations. Convincing the few lingering villagers to relocate was the local Party secretary's job. It is policy that the government cannot force people to relocate.

I was perhaps most impressed with the system to mitigate fraud, which is called "third-party evaluation." In such a massive country with such large flows of funds and so many officials' careers on the line, risk of abuse and manipulation remains a problem even with big successes in industry, education, and relocation.

Between 2015 and 2019, almost 3 million Party officials were working on the frontlines of rural poverty alleviation across China. The third-party evaluators' task was to critique both the successes and the challenges of the poverty alleviation process and assess how well officials were performing. Since the evaluators were from completely different regions, they could not personally know any of the officials whom they were evaluating, so they could not be swayed by personal relationships. To ensure that local officials could not prepare facades for inspection visits, the evaluation teams determined their schedule on-

Dr. Kuhn interviews villagers during an investigative tour of Guizhou in November 2017.



Dr. Kuhn (back) and Yao Hai, Party secretary of Daijing Village, Guizhou, take a motorcycle ride to visit households in remote areas.



the-fly and showed up unannounced.

"I wasn't expecting such positive results," said one unsophisticated American after watching our film. "I guess there are so many negative reports about China that we assume they couldn't care less about their lower class."

China Report ASEAN: Why do you think China was able to make such great achievements in poverty alleviation? What challenges does China face?

Kuhn: Some may be surprised to learn that CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping considers poverty alleviation his most important task. For about seven years, I have been tracking Xi's relentless pursuit to eradicate all absolute poverty

in China by 2020.

In the early decades of reform when leaders looked at poverty alleviation from wider angles, they focused mostly on economic growth, which brought hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty, the greatest developmental success story in human history. But around the turn of the century, especially after the 18th CPC National Congress in late 2012, leaders began realizing that about 100 million Chinese remained intractably poor.

On November 3, 2013, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping first proposed the concept of "targeted" poverty alleviation. He said targeted measures should be made based on practical situations and empty slogans should be

avoided.

I was startled to discover that they have a file on every poor family in China, each with a "targeted" plan to lift the subject above the line of absolute poverty. Poor families have customized plans, each checked monthly, recorded on paper, and digitized for central compilation and analysis. That's millions of households!

The success of China's targeted poverty alleviation campaign, which has been bringing 10 to 14 million people per year out of poverty since 2013, depends on strict, quantitative, and transparent procedures. Moreover, China's achievements in poverty alleviation can be attributed to three powerful parallel factors: CPC leadership, CPC General Secretary Xi's commitment, and CPC mobilization.

First, the operational leadership of the CPC is not just giving directives and pronouncements but actually implementing programs and projects through the CPC organizational structure: central government and five levels of local government (provincial, municipal, county, township and village). Second, the commitment of CPC General Secretary Xi, who has set an example for leaders and officials by voicing his personal opinions repeatedly and allocating his personal time extensively. He has stressed poverty alleviation and encouraged Party cadres to visit impoverished areas regularly and interact with local people directly. Third, the CPC can coordinate personnel and materials throughout the country. Whether fighting the COVID-19 epidemic or poverty, this "country-wide" mechanism demonstrates, in



For good reason, China's poverty alleviation accomplishments have been dubbed a developmental miracle.

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A screen grab taken from documentary *Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty*.

concrete terms, the advantages of the Chinese system. The country can concentrate all its resources and unite all its peoples to achieve overarching national objectives.

China's targeted poverty alleviation campaign, for all its historic success, has of course faced some challenges. Most notably, the continuing impact of the coronavirus epidemic, with vast social disruptions and a huge economic slowdown, does not look to be ending any time soon. The general economic decline throughout the world brought by the sudden pandemic has resulted in declining economies buying less from China's export-oriented companies. Third, rocky relations with the U.S. adds another level of economic uncertainty and pressure.

China Report ASEAN: What do you think other developing

countries can learn from China's poverty reduction experience?

Kuhn: Among developing countries, only China has achieved rapid development and large-scale poverty reduction in which the poor have shared the fruits of reform and opening up over such a long time. Many of the most immovably poor have finally climbed out of poverty over the last seven years or so. For good reason, China's poverty alleviation accomplishments have been dubbed a developmental miracle.

As someone trained in science, I appreciate Chinese leadership's approach to tackling problems from a scientific perspective which includes a rigorous planning process, developing specific implementation measures, extensive monitoring, seeking feedback, and of course correction.

For poverty alleviation, this meant developing five methods to deal with different situations: creating sustainable micro-business to foster industry, relocating people out of remote areas, providing education and training, offering ecological compensation for those inhabiting ecologically vulnerable areas, and ensuring social security, medical subsidies, and direct payments for those who cannot work.

All countries should recognize the critical importance of the fight against poverty and methods to motivate officials to prioritize poverty alleviation in the hierarchy of values in their work. This can come only from the top down. This is an important experience China can share with the rest of the world. ■