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Robert Kuhn: Documenting China's poverty battle

By CHEN YUTONG

Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, president of The Kuhn Foundation and China Reform Friendship Medal Recipient, has been highly involved in recording the Chinese people's great fight in eliminating extreme poverty. His documentary film introduces China's unique approach, and shares the nation's experience and actions in poverty alleviation. Here, Kuhn tells CSST about the eight years he spent on this project and the incredible transformation he witnessed firsthand.

CSST: Why do you choose to tell China's poverty alleviation story to the world?

Dr. Robert Kuhn: If I were to choose one word to describe my engagement with China for more than thirty years, I'd choose fascination. I am fascinated by China's remarkable development and the complexity of the issues that the country faces domestically and internationally. As someone who would neither whitewash nor condemn China, I count myself privileged to have learned a great deal in my long engagement with this country.

I have found that China's poverty alleviation program is the best story to undermine biases and disrupt stereotypes about China. A good part of the reason this story is so compelling, is that foreigners have very limited knowledge of China's poverty alleviation commitment and campaign. In the West, we don't know that in China the biggest thing right now is the achievement of "a moderately prosperous society."

Although China has made many achievements, none have been as representative of the real China, and none have been so powerful in impact, as China's commitment to eradicate all extreme poverty in the country and China's systematic implementation of this goal by the end of 2020.

Over the past 30 years, intensely for the past 15 years, I have traveled across China visiting over 100 cities and innumerable counties, townships, and villages, with my long-term partner, Adam Zhu, for research, investigation, writing books and essays, producing television and documentaries.

I did not appreciate all that is required for poverty alleviation until I arrived on-location in poor regions, especially in remote mountainous villages. I had the opportunity to speak with poor villagers and hear their stories. I came to feel, vicariously, as if I had been part of their families and had made the poverty-alleviation journey with them.

CSST: You have directly participated in many China-related documentaries. For instance, a



Kuhn talks with local villagers. Photo: PROVIDED TO CSST

recent documentary named "Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty" has gained popularity in China and abroad. Please tell us more about it.

Dr. Robert Kuhn: On July 31, 2019, PBS SoCal, the PBS flagship public television station in Southern California in the United States, premiered my documentary on China's historic poverty alleviation campaign: "Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty," the inside story of China's race to eradicate all absolute poverty by 2020. This is the first in-depth documentary about China's poverty alleviation campaign to be broadcast abroad. In May 2020, it was broadcast again in the United States.

Working with the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee, the National Administration for Rural Revitalization (former State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development), and with CGTN, our international film crew had unprecedented access to travel across China, embedded in the country's massive poverty alleviation programs. The documentary provides a textured and intimate portrayal of China's poverty alleviation by following six cases that highlight China's strategy, and the systems and organization needed to implement it.

Our documentary operates on two levels: first, by portraying how China's poverty alleviation works, and second, by undermining certain biases about China. After watching our film, one not unsophisticated American said, "I wasn't expecting a positive outcome. I guess there are so many negative reports about China that we assume they couldn't care less about their underclass. My opinion has changed."

CSST: From the frontline of China's poverty alleviation campaign, what are the most memorable experiences and stories?

Dr. Robert Kuhn: I was startled to discover that every poor family in

China has its own file, each with a targeted plan to lift that specific family above the line of absolute poverty—that's numerous poor households with customized plans, each checked monthly, recorded on paper, and digitized for central compilation and analysis.

Equally startling, young Party cadres are dispatched to impoverished villages to manage poverty alleviation for two years. I was especially moved when I spent days with young Party cadres who had been assigned to very poor, very isolated villages, and saw how these cadres visited poor families regularly on their motorcycles. I rode with them, a bit timorously.

Although poverty is being fought the world over, there is nothing anywhere like China's relocation of whole villages on a massive, national scale—moving people from remote rural areas to cities, providing homes and jobs, giving them a real chance at a better life.

What might sound good in theory might not work well in practice, which is why I wanted to see how it actually works on the ground. I travelled to Guizhou Province, Hui-shui County, where the relocation of whole villages was underway. From remote mountain hamlets, villagers were being moved to Mingtian community, 70 kilometers away.

Housing is free for villagers who relocate here. The government also covers all basic amenities, including sofas, beds, kitchenware, and

TVs. But how can these rural men, who were farmers, learn new, non-farming jobs? I joined a cooking class and got to know one of the former farmers who was learning to be a chef. I spent time with three generations of his family and several of his friends. Most of them were appreciative of their new lives.

Yet, not everyone from the villages agrees to move to the new communities. After all, the farms had been their lives for generations. I travelled to Daijing village to meet the Party secretary. His job was to convince the few remaining villagers to relocate. It is policy that neither the Party secretary nor the government can force people to relocate.

One of the aspects of China's poverty alleviation campaign that impressed me the most was the system put in place to mitigate fraud, called "third-party evaluation." For example, our documentary focused on a team of professors and students from Southwest University in Chongqing. Authorized and trained by the central government, they traveled more than 300 kilometers from their university deep into rural Sichuan Province. The governing idea is that since third-party evaluators come from completely different regions, they would not likely know any of the officials whom they would be evaluating, and thus not be swayed by personal relationships. To ensure that the local officials do not prepare for inspection visits, the evaluation team decides where they will go only at the last minute, often the morning of the inspection.

CSST: What are the major factors contributing to China's poverty alleviation achievements? What experience does it offer for other nations?

Dr. Robert Kuhn: To me, there exists a remarkable parallelism between China's war on COVID-19 and China's war on poverty. The structural similarities are striking, founded on three powerful principles: CPC leadership, general

secretary of the CPC Central Committee Xi Jinping's commitment, and CPC mobilization. The West should understand that it is the same CPC-led political system that eliminated absolute poverty and contained the coronavirus.

Now that China's 2020 poverty alleviation mission has been completed, China has achieved the poverty reduction goal set by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ten years ahead of schedule. No other country has brought so many people out of poverty, and done so in such a short period of time. Certainly, China hopes to share its poverty alleviation experiences.

We cannot take programs from one country and impose them wholly, without adaptation, on another country. However, the principles are what's important. China's principles of poverty alleviation are clear, "targeted" poverty alleviation employs specific measures to fit specific circumstances and needs, and a clear organizational structure to implement those measures, monitor them, and check them.

Nonetheless, for a country to make a success of poverty alleviation, the number one criterion is that the country's leadership must make an absolute commitment to accomplish it. Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee unambiguously asserted: "I have spent more energy on poverty alleviation than on anything else." This sends a powerful message to officials at all levels, indeed to the entire country. I know no other national leader who has made such an assertion. So, a country's senior leader needs to make the overall mission of poverty alleviation a high priority for the nation. Then, one individual needs to be empowered with the authority and resources to implement the national program.

We think of poverty programs in terms of criteria, measures, mechanisms, and procedures. Indeed, China has pioneered micro-businesses, education, relocating whole villages, eco-compensation, and social security. These can be adapted to other countries, as can the Party-led organizational system of implementing poverty alleviation through the "five levels" of local government (provincial, municipal, county, township, village).

The bottom line, though, that all countries should recognize in the fight against poverty, is the critical importance of motivating officials to make poverty alleviation a priority in the hierarchy of values in their work. This can come only from the top down. China's monumental success is founded on its whole-country commitment and implementation. History may well thank China for pioneering its approach to virulent contagions in a globalized world, just as it may well thank China for showing how to bring so many people out of extreme poverty. When historians of the future write the chronicles of our times, a feature story may well be China's targeted poverty alleviation.



The crew members document poverty alleviation efforts. Photo: PROVIDED TO CSST