

Inside China's race to beat poverty

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Xi Jinping has vowed to eradicate extreme rural deprivation by the end of 2020. Will he meet his target?

Two A3-sized cards hanging outside the door of Jike Shibu's house in Atule'er, a village perched on a cliff in the mountains of south-west China, were enough to determine his family's fate. One was white and divided into four sections: "Having a good house; living a good life; cultivating good habits; creating a good atmosphere." Each section was scored out of 100, with Jike's family gaining just 65 points on the issue of housing.

Next to the white card was a red one, granting them the title of "poverty-stricken household with a card and record". On it, an official's handwritten recommendations for how the family could improve their lot. Their "main cause of poverty" was diagnosed as "bad transport infrastructure and lack of money". Recommended measures included growing higher-profit crops, such as Sichuanese peppercorn, and "changing their customs".

By themselves, the cards are not much use to the villagers: very few of those born before the 2000s read Chinese characters fluently. But the writing on them has changed their futures — in Jike's case, resettling his family in a purpose-built, bustling compound in the nearby market town of Zhaojue.

Zhaojue is a place in a hurry. The government has set a deadline of the [end of this month](#) to end extreme poverty in the surrounding county of Liangshan, one of the most deprived in China. "Win the tough battle to end poverty," proclaims the central hotel on a red electronic marquee — along with the number of days to the deadline. On the narrow streets outside, farmers rush around with wicker baskets full of produce, and vendors sell shoes and clothes piled high on plastic sheets.

The roots of this frantic activity go back to 2013, when leader Xi Jinping set a deadline for all of China's rural counties to [eradicate extreme poverty](#) by the end of 2020. In the four decades since market reform began, China has already made huge advances in this area, winning praise from the UN, World Bank and figures from Bill Gates to [Bernie Sanders](#), for raising 850 million people out of extreme poverty.

For both Xi and the Chinese Communist party, poverty-alleviation goals are more than a policy target. They are also a major source of legitimacy, both inside China and globally. "In my opinion, western politicians act for the next election. [By contrast] China has a ruling party that wants to achieve big goals," says Hu Angang, a government adviser and head of China Studies at Tsinghua university. "In the history of human development, China achieving this is, if not unique, then at least something worthy of admiration."

In the five years of Xi's first term, an average of 13 million people were lifted out of poverty each year, according to the government. Some 775,000 officials were sent to villages to lead poverty alleviation and the government fund for this purpose increased by more than 20 per cent annually since 2013. State media said in March that central coffers had already handed out Rmb139.6bn (£15.8bn) of an estimated Rmb146bn this year. But the [Covid-19 epidemic](#) has led to an economic

downturn, with the country's GDP for the first quarter [shrinking for the first time in four decades](#). Areas that were already deprived have been some of the hardest hit.

By the end of 2019, there were still 5.5 million individuals in extreme rural poverty around China. Xi's goal is to bring this figure to zero in time for the centenary of the Communist party in July 2021. Coinciding with this would allow him to declare that China is prosperous and deserves to be a world leader, says Gao Qin, an expert on China's social welfare at Columbia University. "The government is determined to achieve this goal," says Gao. "Since March, official publications have reaffirmed that it must happen by the end of the year."

In a bid to do this, the fronts for Xi's "tough battle" on poverty are shifting. "Some villages are in extreme poverty that is difficult to alleviate, because of natural conditions and of the lack of transport infrastructure. In these places, very few villagers can become migrant workers and they rely on subsistence agriculture," says Wang Xiangyang, assistant professor of public affairs at Southwest Jiaotong University. These include remote mountain communities such as the one in which Jike lives.

Atule'er — or [Cliff Village](#) as it is now widely known in China — sits atop a 1,400m mountain. Like many of the Yi ethnic minority areas of Liangshan, it is infrequently visited by tourists and difficult to reach, and may well have stayed that way had it not come to [national prominence in 2016](#). That year, a local media feature showed children clinging to an old, crumbling vine ladder on their two-hour descent to the nearest school. Soon, more journalists arrived, and the local government pledged a new 800m steel ladder.

"Liangshan became the forefront of poverty alleviation — a lab within the country," says Jan Karlach, research fellow at the Czech Academy of Sciences, whose research has focused on Liangshan and the Nuosu-Yi for the past 10 years. In 2017, at the annual meeting of China's parliament, Xi dropped by the Sichuan province delegation to ask about progress alleviating poverty among the Yi people. "When I saw a report about the Liangshan cliff village on television . . . I felt anxious," he said.

Over the past few months, the local government has [resettled 84 households](#), or half the village, in Zhaojue, giving them apartments at the heavily subsidised price of Rmb10,000 (£1,130) per apartment. The "resettlement homes" are located a two-hour drive away from the base of Atule'er's mountain, with a red banner across the entrance welcoming new residents.

The villagers allocated these flats are happy to have them. On the mountaintop, their earthen houses are exposed to the rain, as well as fatal rock slides. There, the only industry is subsistence farming. There is no medical care or formal education.

While some Yi academics question the changing of local (non-Han Chinese) customs for those moved from Cliff Village, the Communist party's efforts have been largely welcomed. "Even my traditionalist friend — who said he couldn't live in a house without a Yi fireplace — ditched the idea within a year," says Karlach. His friend now lives in a town apartment with a picture of Xi on the wall: a poster handed out by local officials to remind poor households who to thank.

But others are not yet sure how to adapt to life in the town, where they will have to transform their mountain-dwelling culture to fit the 100 sq m apartments. "My mother isn't keen to come down from the mountaintop," says the 24-year-old Jike. "Elderly people don't like the town, they say there's no land and nothing to eat there. I say, 'What others eat, you'll eat.' The elderly can't stay up there on their own."

Recently, Jike has been carrying heavy loads of bedding and clothes on his trips down the mountain,

getting ready for his move. He has also acquired a following on social media. Hopping between slippery footholds, his giant plastic pack on his back, he holds his smartphone out on a selfie stick and chats cheerfully to fans on [Douyin](#), China's domestic version of TikTok. Jike can earn Rmb3,000 per month from live-streaming: a fortune compared with the Rmb700 average for rural locals.

He has agreed to take us up to his village in part because he believes the residents who remain there need a better platform to air their views. In some regions, China's strategy of development through urbanisation has led to forced demolitions, and farmers stripped of the land their families had tended for generations. But Cliff Village faces the opposite problem: there are many more people who want to move than the government has relocated.

Over the two days that we spend there, more people approach us, wanting to show us the insides of their houses and tell us how the local government has overlooked them. In Zhaojue, the threshold for being extremely poor is living on less than Rmb4,200 per year (£475) and, in Cliff Village, such officially "poverty-stricken" households receive a basic income guarantee, the right to buy cut-price new apartments — and even 30 chickens.

But there are also those unlucky enough to be officially logged as poor, either through neglect, miscalculation or mere bureaucracy. They do not receive the same benefits, although they are entitled to some payments, such as the minimum livelihood guarantee. They also do not count towards the government's poverty-eradication target. In some cases, the government has solved meeting its poverty targets administratively: certain areas have stopped logging residents as "impoverished" since the start of the year. "It's all been counted, the system no longer takes new impoverished households," says Azi Aniu, a local county-level party secretary. (He later vacillated on this point, telling us that they were able to log new impoverished households but chose not to.)

While the rapid rate of alleviation is real, the true level of poverty may be impossible to gauge in a system not designed to admit mistakes. According to official policy, if the minimum-livelihood guarantee was being implemented properly, such impoverished households would not exist. The current database will be overhauled for the next step of China's development plan, which will move on to "precarious" or "borderline" households.

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- Wang Xiangyang, assistant professor at Southwest Jiaotong University

According to Li Shi, professor of economics at Beijing Normal University, surveys from 2014 suggested some 60 per cent of those who should qualify for "poverty-stricken" status based on their low incomes did not get the designation. In the years that followed, "some adjustments were made, and there should be some improvement," Li wrote.

But many of those still in Atule'er feel left behind. "You're not going to write one of those 'Goodbye to Cliff Village' articles, are you?" asks Jike Quri, a man who had waited all day at the top of the steel ladder for us to arrive. "There is no goodbye: half of us are still here."

Within an hour of us checking in, local authorities arrived at our hotel door, indicating the sensitivities around this story. State media had come the week before to report on one of the most high-profile battlegrounds in China's anti-poverty push, and had written stories about happy villagers moving into their flats.

In one local media spread, the family of Mou'se Xiongti, a 25-year-old man, were photographed in

their new flat, the bed decked with blankets. When we visited Mou'se's flat, it was empty except for the government-provided furniture: a set of cabinets, sofa, chairs, tables and bed. Many items were stamped with "People's Government of Sichuan Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China".

The nervousness of local politicians is largely due to the fact that Cliff Village is now renowned for its role as part of a high-level target: Xi has personally embraced poverty alleviation, boosting his populist image as a "peasant emperor" with sympathies for ordinary Chinese people — a persona not dissimilar to that cultivated by Mao Zedong. State propaganda often depicts Xi chatting with farmers about the harvest, sitting cross-legged in village homes or laughing with pensioners. In his first five-year presidential term from 2012, he visited 180 poor regions across 20 provinces. [He visited Liangshan in 2018.](#)

The red and white cards that ultimately gave Jike Shibu's family a flat are part of a policy which required creating a database of households and checking their progress. This campaign came with a boost in government funding for rural social welfare projects, a powerful committee to guide policy and the establishment of a national database of poor households. By the end of this year, that system must be cleared of households like Jike's.

But the villagers still left in Atule'er say they have not received such targeted attention from the local officials, who, they allege, don't bother to visit their mountaintop homes that often. (The local official Azi counters that he has trekked up the mountain so many times he has damaged his legs.) As a result, they complain there is no meaningful distinction between "poverty-stricken" households and others, and those in need of help are not getting it.

Some households face the problem of getting lumped together into one record. This happens when adults with their own children are still marked on the record of their parents, meaning they are only assigned one house. Often, officials reject their requests to register new households.

"The relocation apartments are beautiful, they are better than other properties in town, so some villagers get a bit jealous"

Azi Aniu, local official

Others suffer Kafkaesque bureaucratic processes. Jizu Wuluo, a 37-year-old widow and mother to four children, two of whom she had to give up for adoption, is determined to give her youngest a good education and rents a flat near the school at the bottom of the cliff. Jizu ticks many of the boxes of an "impoverished" household: she lives in one of the fragile houses on Cliff Village, heads a single-earner family and also "suffers hardship for education".

However, although she has tried to get "impoverished" status on several occasions, each time officials told her to wait. In October last year she and her two sons were finally each given a minimum livelihood guarantee of Rmb2,940 per year, part of the government's package of anti-poverty measures that it uses when all else fails. About 43 million people receive it nationwide. In Zhaojue county, the maximum paid per rural recipient per year is Rmb4,200.

"I know Xi Jinping said to help those poor and suffering ordinary folk, but when it comes to grassroots officials like you, you only help those people who already have standing in society," she says in a meeting with Azi, who listened patiently to a string of complaints.

After we left, Azi quickly followed up on Jizu's case. The explanation for why she had not been prioritised for an apartment raised more questions than it answered. Jizu had been missed out of the

first survey of impoverished households in 2013. Later, she was recorded as “an impoverished household without an official record”. Azi says they could not create an official “impoverished household” record for her after her husband died in 2018. Instead, they added more labels to her case. Azi couldn’t say when the list of impoverished households stopped being amended but, he says, Jizu will be moved into town by the end of the year.

“The relocation apartments are beautiful, they are better than other properties in town, so some villagers get a bit jealous,” says Azi. “I’m being very straightforward with you.”

Moving into town may be one step towards ensuring a secure livelihood, but the most important is finding work. Local officials encourage the younger generation to seek jobs in cities, particularly those along the industrialised south-east coast. For decades, rural-urban migration has been the standard way of improving livelihoods: some [236 million people in China are migrant workers](#), according to government statistics.

Of the locals we spoke to in their late teens and twenties, many had gone out to work for a few months at a time. Most did unskilled labour in construction and went in groups arranged by friends or relatives. Like migrants from around China, Liangshan’s workers live as second-class citizens when they arrive in major cities, where it is almost impossible to access healthcare or education for their children. During the coronavirus epidemic, these workers — who often had to continue delivering groceries and cleaning hospitals — were highly vulnerable.

The work that Liangshan locals can do is also limited by their education. Most of our interviewees were semi-literate at best, and some did not speak Mandarin. The internet is changing that. Social media, ecommerce and live-streaming have created greater opportunity for reading and writing outside of the world of formal education. Jike, who received just two years of schooling, says he learnt a lot about reading, writing and speaking Chinese from live-streaming. Every now and then, as viewers’ comments flash in real time across his screen, he addresses the commenter by saying, “Sister, I can’t read that.”

Education is another way of leaving the village. While some families prefer to let their children work, others are keen to send them to school. Mou’s Lazuo, the 17-year-old sister of Xiongti, hopes to break the trend in her village by going to university. She is the oldest girl in Cliff Village still at school; the older ones have gone to work or got married. She is one of 72 students in her class.

While she speaks Yi at home, Mou’s studies in Mandarin, with the exception of an hour and a half of Yi language classes per week. “I think it’s fine for Han culture to come here, so long as Han culture and Yi exist side by side,” she says. “We can’t leave parts of our traditional culture, like our legends and our language.”

The Yi didn’t come to China: China came to the Yi. Yi people have lived in the mountains of Liangshan for centuries, not far from Sichuan’s borders with Tibet and Myanmar. After teetering on the edge of the Chinese empire for over a millennium, Liangshan was brought under Communist rule in 1957 with the help of the People’s Liberation Army. The Yi were categorised as such by anthropologists sent by the Beijing-based national government in the 1950s, who determined the roster of 55 officially recognised ethnic minorities.

“It’s a civilising project,” says Karlach, the researcher who has lived in Liangshan, describing the government’s attitude towards poverty alleviation with ethnic minorities. “In Liangshan, in many places, they’re not offered to indigenise or develop their own modernity: they are given the modernity from the outside. They want to be Chinese and are proud to be Chinese, but also want to be Yi.”

For the government, teaching the Mandarin language and Han customs not only makes ethnic minorities easier to govern, but also helps them fit into a Han-dominated economy. Also, rapid urbanisation has changed all traditional cultures in China, subsuming them into the monoculture of the city and of earning money.

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Mou’sé Lazuo, student

In Zhaojue, most shops employ at least some locals, although the newer ones are largely run by Han Chinese migrants from richer parts of China. “Generally, local workers don’t stay for long,” says Mao Dongtian, an entrepreneur from the coastal city of Wenzhou. He has opened a local chain of cafés and karaoke bars. His staff earn between Rmb1,000 and Rmb3,000 — a decent amount for the area — but don’t like the discipline and loss of freedom that come with a full-time job, he says.

“Their ways are more backwards than the Han people, and we are trying to teach them our ways,” continues Mao, describing how he encouraged his staff to seek medical help for ailments rather than rely on folk treatments. Such beliefs are typical of the majority ethnic group’s attitudes towards China’s minorities. Though some of these attitudes are rooted in stereotypes, others reflect a way of life shaped by subsistence agriculture.

When I ask Jake what he will most miss about Cliff Village, he says “the view”. He plans to make the trip up now and again to enjoy it. After sunset, there are innumerable stars and the night is black and quiet. Zhaojue, on the other hand, is lit with streetlamps and has the bustle of people and cars.

After June 30, the government will move on to the next stage of China’s development plan: “the strategy to revitalise villages”. Although China’s development plans have focused on the rural poor, the urban poor are of increasing concern. They are more likely to slip between the bureaucratic cracks, as they are often not registered in the places where they live and work. Cities are loath to accept such migrants: two years ago, Beijing “cleaned out” residents referred to by politicians as the “low-end population”. Some economists estimate that about 50 million migrant workers became unemployed [at the start of the epidemic](#).

This month, Premier Li Keqiang sparked a public outcry over Xi’s claims of success on poverty alleviation, after announcing that the bottom two-fifths of the population made on average an income of less than Rmb1,000 a month. Those 600 million people constitute a significant proportion of city dwellers as well as the rural poor.

“Somehow or other, this [poverty] target will be declared to have been achieved and will form a part of the big celebrations next year. And then the goalposts will shift, I suspect towards issues of equality and equity,” said Kerry Brown, a scholar of Chinese politics at King’s College London. “That’s really where the key battleground will be, because inequality in China is a serious problem and it’s not getting better.”

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