

## CHINA

# All counties removed from poverty list

Guizhou areas are the last to announce emergence from impoverishment

By YANG JUN in Guiyang and ZHANG YU

China has removed all remaining counties from the country's poverty list, as Guizhou province announced on Monday that its last nine poverty-stricken counties had officially eliminated poverty.

The nine counties, including Ziyun, Nayong, Weining and Yanhe, were the last group on the country's list of 832 impoverished counties that had been identified in 2014 by the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development.

China has set a goal to eradicate absolute poverty by the end of this year. At the end of last year, 52 counties in the northwest, southwest and south of the country remained on the poverty list.

"Delisting all poverty-stricken counties indicates China has

resolved the millennia-old issue of extreme poverty," Gao Gang, a researcher with the Guizhou Academy of Social Sciences, was quoted as saying by Xinhua News Agency. "It also means China has entered a new phase of development."

In the new development stage, more rural vitalization efforts should be made to consolidate poverty reduction achievements, Gao said.

Guizhou, with 176,200 square kilometers of land — 92.5 percent of which are mountains and hills — was a main battlefield in the fight against poverty. In 2012, Guizhou had the highest number of impoverished people in China, Xinhua reported.

Since that year, the province has seen about 9.23 million people and 66 counties emerge from poverty, according to the Poverty Alleviation and Development Office of Guizhou.

"The escape from poverty that has



Villagers harvest cabbages in a greenhouse in Nayong county, Guizhou province. CHEN JIONGJI / FOR CHINA DAILY

been accomplished by the last nine impoverished counties indicates that Guizhou has removed the label of absolute poverty that it has been tagged with for thousands of years," Qin Rufang, deputy head of the provincial poverty alleviation office, said at a news conference on Monday.

The average annual net income of impoverished people in these nine counties has risen to 11,487 yuan (\$1,740), well above the 4,000-yuan national poverty line set this year, according to Li Jian, head of the provincial poverty-alleviation office.

A series of measures were taken to lift people out of poverty, such as developing suitable industries to increase incomes and create jobs, relocating people who lived in shabby places and improving public services.

The relocation project in Guizhou involved 1.88 million people, a record high in the country, according to Xinhua.

With the help of such measures, Qiu Jianguo, a 39-year-old villager at Zhaile town, Nayong county, enjoyed the changes. In 2013, Qiu's family was recognized as a poor household with a debt of nearly 180,000 yuan. Most of the money was used to obtain medical treatment for his son, who has cerebral palsy.

"At that time, we always chose to eat instant noodles to save money for his treatment," Qiu said.

Since 2013, the local government has taken measures to help Qiu get work.

"Our village hired me as a manager at an agricultural cooperative. From that job, I can earn 2,800 yuan each month," he said. He added that he also plants peppers and flue-cured tobacco, which have yielded 90,000 yuan since last year.

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# Province exemplifies new attitude toward education for girls

By LI LEI in Beijing and YANG JUN in Guiyang

Born and raised in a hamlet hidden deep in the rolling mountains of Guizhou province, where strained rural family finances are usually reserved for male heirs, Wang Yongyan is a watershed for how locals educate girls.

In September, the 20-year-old, who has two younger brothers, became the first woman in her isolated ethnic Miao and Dong community to attend college.

She is also among very few rural students studying vocal music, her dream major.

Art majors are costly, with less certain job prospects. Therefore, they are often shunned by financially-strapped families like Wang's.

All was made possible by Mountain Phoenix, a program that offers scholarships and subsidies to rural families in Liping county that struggle financially, or are simply reluctant, to keep daughters in classrooms beyond China's nine-year compulsory education, which is tuition-free.

The problem is common in rural regions and far-flung ethnic communities.

Poor, conservative farmers in those areas are unwilling to invest in girls because they cannot pass down family names through marriage, which is considered to be important to expand family lineage.

Now attending a four-year undergraduate program at the Minzu University of China in Beijing, Wang said Mountain Phoenix has awarded her an 8,000 yuan (\$1,210) scholarship, which helps cover a large chunk of the annual 12,000 yuan tuition and accommodation fee. Coupled with government-subsidized loans for poor students, Wang said the program has enabled her to choose a major that she truly loves.

"Art majors are costly, and I had been hesitant about the choice because I have two younger brothers," she added.

The program was launched early last year by the Zhejiang Women and Children's Foundation, a government-endorsed charity headquartered in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province.

Ma Lin, deputy head of the county's education bureau, said 29 girls from 10 villages were awarded similar incentives in 2019, and the number has ballooned to 150 this year.

Apart from the scholarships, the program also hands out subsidies ranging from 2,800 to 5,400 yuan for less academically outstanding girls, he said.

## Special subsidies

Though such subsidies are common in many places, Ma said theirs are special.

Instead of depositing the money into their bank accounts, village officials hire drummers, light firecrackers and deliver the money in person. The extravaganza helps make girls and their families proud.

"I saw tears in their eyes," he said.

Efforts to shift people's attitudes are crucial in regions where "older relatives and neighbors usually express strong disapproval for parents who allow their daughters to stay in school for so long," he added.

In the past few years, China has worked successfully to slash dropout rates in rural primary and middle schools as part of broader efforts to curb rural poverty and build China into a "moderately prosperous society in all respects" by the end of this year.

Counties with large numbers of unschooled children are not allowed to remove their poverty labels, which will lead to censures from higher-ups.

China had 600,000 children who dropped out during the first nine years of schooling, according to the Ministry of Education.

That number had plummeted to less than 6,800 by mid-June. Only 97 unschooled children were from families labeled as impoverished.

Though poor students can get easy loans to attend high school and university, many poor parents lack the incentive to invest in girls' education. Instead, girls are told to join the workforce, sometimes to offset the financial burden caused by educating their brothers.

"People in my village do not take girls' education seriously," said Wang. "Even girls themselves do not take education seriously and choose not to continue."

Wang said she was the lucky one. She said her parents are well aware of the difficulties facing illiterate migrant workers and allowed her to continue. But she cannot help interpreting her parents' decision as a way to get her to pay for her brothers' tuitions after graduation.

"One of them is in a vocational school, and the other is a second grader," she said.

The gender bias in education is an even greater issue early on.

Gun Dongmeng, a senior at Guizhou University, said it was common a decade ago for girls in her village in Liping county to start working after completing the ninth grade.

The 21-year-old has a sister in high school and brother in middle school. Both she and her sister are beneficiaries of the Mountain Phoenix program.

Gun said her fellow villagers have grown more supportive of girls' education after finding that female students take lessons more seriously when given the opportunity to carry on with studying. Banners have also appeared everywhere, reading "knowledge is power", which has inspired younger generations of rural women.

"The younger girls that I know of in my village now are all clinging to their studies," she said.

## Shifting attitudes

The progress in the southwestern village is a sample of a broader shift in Chinese people's attitudes toward empowering women.

As the decadeslong one-child policy barred families with a daughter from having a younger son, more parents accepted girls as their heirs and invested more in their future. That trend has manifested in education figures.

According to a 2019 white paper released by the State Council, China's Cabinet, women account for more than 52 percent of undergraduate and vocational college students, despite the fact that China has about 30 million more male citizens. That is 28.4 percentage points higher than in 1978, when China embraced the market economy, and 32.7 percentage points higher than in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded. Women also comprise 48.4 percent of China's graduate students.

The public's attitude toward gender-based prejudices is also decreasing, making it morally unappealing for parents to terminate girls' education.

The anti-sexism sentiment was manifested in a public outcry last year after netizens spotted 47 male beneficiaries among 100 students who received funding from the Spring Bud Project, a government-endorsed charity program that helps slash dropout rates among rural girls.

The China Children and Teenagers' Fund, which launched the project in 1989, later issued a statement explaining that they included boys in their assistance list as their teachers do not want the poor boys to drop out because of exclusive treatment. But netizens were not convinced, and the scrutiny quickly expanded to the charity's other programs.

A netizen commented: "Our money is for poor girls to buy new schoolbags and clothes, not for boys to buy cameras and fulfill their so-called dreams."

Che Weiwei contributed to this story.

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# Measures to aid those affected by COVID-19

By CHENG SI chengsi@chinadaily.com.cn

China has stepped up efforts to ensure the basic needs of the impoverished and vulnerable who have been reeling from the shock of COVID-19, senior officials said on Monday.

Liu Xitang, director of the Ministry of Civil Affairs' social relief department, said at a news conference organized by the State Council Information Office that measures will be taken to ensure all vulnerable groups are included in a thorough census of people in need of social relief, expanding the relief's coverage and increasing financial support for severely-impoverished and epidemic-affected populations and areas.

As the epidemic worsened many people's living conditions this year, the ministry organized surveys of those who have shaken off poverty but are likely to fall back in it.

"We've reviewed about 3.61 million people so far, with 1.09 million of them newly included (in the safety net)," he said.

So far, there are about 20 million people covered by the safety net — which was established for impoverished people who are unable to work — up by 1.47 million from last year, he said.

In rural areas, vulnerable groups have seen their minimum annual living allowance rise to about 5,800 yuan (\$883) this year from 3,178 yuan in 2015, exceeding the nation's average anti-poverty income standard of about 4,000 yuan per capita, said Chen Hongbo, director of the policy, laws and regulations department of the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development.

The central government also expanded coverage of its relief plan. Tang Chengpei, vice-minister of civil affairs, said at the news conference that this year, those whose family earnings are above the poverty line but who suffer serious disability or severe diseases were included in the relief plan.

Migrant workers who could not get jobs in cities due to the epidemic were given one-off temporary subsidies to assist them through hard times.

Official figures showed the country has provided temporary subsidies for 7.46 million people this year, up 56 percent from the same period last year.

Xinhua contributed to this story.

## Play the Dong way



Dong ethnic people compete while playing the lusheng, a reed-pipe wind instrument, in Sanjiang Dong autonomous county, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, on Saturday. The region approved the removal of its last eight counties from the poverty list on Friday. GONG PUKANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

# Rural areas follow path to prosperity

Mi Zhenhua skillfully makes USB cables in a poverty-relief factory in the Weilaba Zhuhai residential compound in Yunnan province. She can make at least 2,000 yuan (\$305) from this business every month.

Mi used to live in the remote Ziji village in Yunnan's Lushui city, where geological disasters like landslides are frequent. "I hated rainy days because I was scared of mudslides," said Mi, 29. "The village was a five to six hour walk from the nearest town. Transportation was inconvenient."

Last year, thanks to China's poverty alleviation efforts, her family moved into a beautiful house in the brand-new Weilaba Zhuhai residential compound, which houses more than 700 poor families from two townships in Lushui. Her daughter also attends a kindergarten in the community.

Local authorities opened a poverty-relief factory there, allowing people like Mi to find jobs to increase their income. Now, all poor residents of the community have shaken off poverty.

"I am just so happy and content," Mi said. Mi is not alone. On Nov 14, authorities announced that Yunnan, which had the country's largest remaining poor population at the end of last year, has eradicated absolute poverty.

A majority of localities in China have cast off poverty as the country looks to eradicate absolute poverty by the end of this year in a bid to

build a "moderately prosperous society in all respects".

On Saturday, authorities in Gansu province announced that all of its 75 counties have been lifted out of poverty.

## Road out of poverty

China has taken a variety of poverty-relief measures — including promoting rural tourism, introducing industries, conducting relocations and offering better healthcare — to help people live better.

In Xijiang, a Miao ethnic village tucked away in Guizhou province, locals have wallowed in poverty for generations, cut off from the world by mountains that surround the area.

However, as local authorities encouraged rural tourism, Hou Yanjiang, who used to be a migrant worker, started a rural restaurant, which now generates more than 5 million yuan in annual sales.

In the mountainous city of Chishui in Guizhou, a red, rocky surface known as the Danxia landform that covers more than two-thirds of the city stands out.

For local farmers, the rocks used to be a stumbling block to planting crops. Then came a government initiative that encouraged growing the *Dendrobium nobile* species of orchid, a valuable Chinese herbal medicine found in the rocks.

Currently, the orchids cover more than 6,000 hectares in the city, helping about 16,000 poor residents increase their salaries.

Relocation also proved to be an important step out of poverty. In the last five years, more than 9 million rural poor in China were moved out of inhospitable areas that mired generations of inhabitants in poverty.

In the Ningxia Hui autonomous region, Ma Guoquan used to live in a rural area with scarce water resources. In 2017, he moved into a 96-square-meter house by the Yellow River.

"With water from the Yellow River, irrigation became easy," Ma said. Better healthcare also contributed to poverty relief.

Some rural hospitals partnered with their metropolitan counterparts to offer quality medical services to rural residents.

"Illness-induced poverty is one of the toughest problems in rural areas," said Hu Yi, head of the public hospital in the county of Zhenxiang in Yunnan.

"Now they don't have to travel far to get treated, not even for serious illnesses."

These efforts have paid off, and countless rural people have seen a significant improvement in their lives.

The number of Chinese living in poverty dropped from 98.9 million to 5.51 million in the last seven years. The per capita net income of the poor rose from 4,124 yuan in 2016 to 9,057 yuan in 2019, an average annual growth of 30 percent.

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