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Global Politics Essay

China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign as a means of development

How sustainable is China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign in 2015-2020?

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction.....	3
Methodology	6
The Source of Poverty, Poverty Vulnerability, and the Poverty Returning Problem	7
The Source of Poverty	7
The Poverty Returning Problem.....	10
The Chinese “Campaign Style Mobilization” and its Impact.....	14
The Unique Form of Bureaucratic.....	14
The Campaign Logic	16
Conclusion	19
Reference	20

Introduction

This essay evaluates China's approach, progress, sustainability, and the feasibility for it to maintain its progress in its development as a one-party state over the past years. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Poverty Alleviation Campaign in 2015-2020, which Xi Jinping, the President of the People's Republic of China since 2013, has announced fully successful at the end of 2020, would be the path I have taken to investigate China's development investigated as for all the 17 sustainable development goals of the United Nations until 2030, "End poverty in all its forms everywhere" is the first on the list.¹

While poverty is a multidimensional issue, it is generally measured by income level when comes to measuring the poverty level of a specific region. The World Bank established the current international extreme poverty line at \$1.90 per day (2011 PPP)². The poverty line China currently using was established in 2011, set at \$339.7 (RMB 2,300) per year at constant 2010 prices, which equates to \$0.93 (RMB 6.3) per day³. On February 4 2021, Chinese official media Xinhua published the article *Backgrounder: Facts and figures about China's poverty reduction drive* where they recognized the success of the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign:

"By the end of 2020, nearly 100 million impoverished rural residents had escaped poverty since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, and all 832 national-level poverty-stricken counties had shaken off

¹ Li, Su, and Liu, "Realizing Targeted Poverty Alleviation in China."

² China Power Team, "Is China Succeeding at Eradicating Poverty? | ChinaPower Project."

³ China Power Team; Li, Su, and Liu, "Realizing Targeted Poverty Alleviation in China"; Smith, "The Campaign Rolls On"; Chen, Rong, and Song, "Poverty Vulnerability and Poverty Causes in Rural China"; Xia, "Backgrounder: Facts and Figures about China's Poverty Reduction Drive - Xinhua | English.News.Cn"; Hu and Li, "A Chinese Guide to Poverty Alleviation | Opinion | China Daily"; Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

poverty...Despite the unprecedented impacts brought by COVID-19, China removed the remaining 52 counties from the poverty list as scheduled last year.⁴

Regarding this Poverty Alleviation Campaign, I'm going to explore the sustainability of its development. The main concern I had would be whether the amount of mobilization and pressure the word "campaign" carries has made itself infallible, whether this is a "spreadsheet alleviation" as one user who claimed to be one of government officers who've been involved in this project from the Chinese online community, Baidu Tieba, put it⁵, and whether the root cause of the poverty has been addressed after the claimed success of the campaign thus evaluate whether China's current success on poverty alleviation effort is sustainable.

When the extent of development is measured income-based, there aren't many disputes about the enormous amount of progress China has made since its "opening up" in 1980. However, when the extent of China's development were measured by more complex and more holistic views instead of economic indicators, the progress was not as recognized. While China's GDP per capita has grown from \$303 billion in 1980 to \$15222 billion in 2020 as the world's second-largest economy, from slightly above 1/9 of the GDP of the world's largest economy US to more than 7/10 of the GDP of the US⁶, China's Human Development Index (HDI) is still ranked 85th in 2020⁷. The different results regarding China's progress in development coming out from different measurement methods prove this topic to be worthy of discussion. Moreover, China has taken its unique models of development with its own approach, which is novel if not shocking, and that is noteworthy for most other countries.

⁴ Xia, "Backgrounder: Facts and Figures about China's Poverty Reduction Drive - Xinhua | English.News.Cn."

⁵ "Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧) tieba.Baidu.Com."

⁶ "World Economic Outlook Database, October 2020."

⁷ "Latest Human Development Index Ranking | Human Development Reports."

I came from a family with a heavy rural background. Both of my parents are the only member of their family to receive an education beyond middle school, despite having 3 siblings respectively. Most of my relatives are still living in the rural part of China and I was constantly under the conflict between the two different forms of lifestyle, ideology, and social expectations of the rural village in Anhui and the metropolis Shanghai. This essay has a personal significance to me as by investigating this specific area which is at the centre of the conflict between the two ideologies I have been raised under, the conclusion would offer me insights on how to turn my doubts and uncertainties into an advantage that would offer me a balanced and inclusive viewpoint on such political issues

Lastly, this research question is related to the subject of global politics since it has the unit of development, both development and sustainability are one of the 16 key concepts of the subject, and poverty is one of the six global political challenges for the HL extension. The success of the poverty alleviation campaign not only has its significance on the local level of decreasing the wealth gap and increase the overall welfare thus social stability of the citizens and on the national level of securing the credibility and the ground of legitimacy of the CCP but also has its broader significance on the international level that the approaches of the CCP to reach this ground-breaking achievement could become a model that other developing countries look up to if proven success sustainable in the long term. Thus, through investigation, I'm going to testify whether they have come up with a ground-breaking system of poverty alleviation that could be applied to the world and grant extra millions of people their basic human right.

Methodology

I used a range of resources as the basis of my investigation, including journal articles, book sections, newspaper articles, blog posts, speeches, and documents released by CCP officials, and online databases. I used a combination of primary and secondary resources, and each of them has its advantages and shortcomings.

Regarding primary sources, while they provide a more original, authentic, and in-depth viewpoint, they are most of the time not very accessible and cannot be determined how representative they are. Moreover, while I was, fortunately, able to find some direct voices from people who claimed to be at the frontline of this poverty alleviation campaign from the Chinese online community “Baidu Tieba”, they are pretty much the only primary sources of people’s voice I can find inside the firewall of Chinese internet due to its renowned strict censorship. The identity of the users on Baidu Tieba also could not be confirmed thus making the sources less reliable.

For secondary sources, each type of source I used also has its advantages and shortcomings respectively. The world figures sometimes are not representative or have a small sample size as the organization has not been granted access by the Chinese government, and the government figures might be possibly skewed for propaganda purposes. Thus, there is a limit on the information that the audience can get, but this can be solved by collecting a wide range of data. Especially for journal articles, the origin, funding, and publication place of the paper had a huge influence on the results and the conclusions of its content. Where possible I also look for corroboration. Nevertheless, as my sources provided drastically different evaluations on China’s development progress based on their perspective, I must incorporate all of my sources and come to some sort of middle ground to better the two ends of the argument.

The Source of Poverty, Poverty Vulnerability, and the Poverty Returning Problem

This section is going to explore the source of poverty and poverty vulnerability of China with literature reviews, thus exploring the prospect of future poverty returning rate through examining whether the root of poverty has been successfully solved from the Chinese's mechanisms.

The Source of Poverty

There were generally three perspectives in viewing the cause of poverty. The first theoretical perspective attributes the cause of poverty to the problem of the poor people themselves, such as their lack of abilities, effort, or thrift. The second perspective considers poverty as the consequence of unfavourable economic, political, cultural, and social forces, such as exploitation by capitalists and lack of social opportunities. The third perspective views poverty as a result of some unforeseen circumstances like illness, bad luck, or misfortunes over which the people have almost no control with⁸.

Looking back at China's poverty alleviation history, China has made great efforts to alleviate poverty alleviation since the opening-up. However, the policies were long-time urban-biased and have putted the Chinese villages in an unfavourable environment in which great profits were squeezed to support the urban development and made the villages being tortured by ever aggravating poverty. In working paper *Poverty in China Since 1950: A counterfactual perspective* by Martin Ravallion from the US National Bureau of Economic Research, this scholar even argued that supposing none of the city population was poor but that 95% of those in rural areas and the towns were poor, there would be a poverty rate of 88% for China

⁸ Li, Su, and Liu, "Realizing Targeted Poverty Alleviation in China."

in 1950. An interesting point to note is that Ravallion also argued that China's post-reform reduction in the incidence of poverty it's a success in correcting the past failures in its economic policies in Maoist periods rather than actual progress when compared to the development path taken by South Korea and Taiwan⁹

Another research *Poverty Vulnerability and Poverty Causes in Rural China* by Jiandong Chen, SishiRong, and Malin Song studied the effects and contributions of rural poverty incidence, rural agricultural outcomes per capita, the proportion of agricultural outcomes, gross domestic product per capita, and total population on rural poverty based on the logarithmic mean Division index method towards the number of rural poor from 2008 to 2017.

Figure 2 would be a summary of their finding on the effects of the factors respectively, where PR denotes rural poverty incidence, IPAGR denotes the reciprocal of rural agricultural outcomes per capita, PAGR denotes the proportion of agricultural outcomes, PGDP denotes gross domestic product per capita, P denotes total population. A positive number means an increase in that factor would lead to an increase in the number of rural poor, and vice versa. The overall effect of the incidence of rural poverty on rural poverty from 2008 to 2017 was positive, at 572.82; the reciprocal of rural agricultural outcomes per capita had a negative effect on the number of rural poor, which means the rural agricultural outcomes per capita always have a positive effect on the degree of rural poverty; the proportion of agricultural outcomes showed a negative effect on the number of rural poor, with a total effect of 1281.11; the GDP per capita showed a positive effect on the number of rural poor, which is

⁹ Ravallion, "Poverty in China since 1950."

2779.45; and the total population had a positive effect on the number of the rural poor, at the rate of 190.64¹⁰.

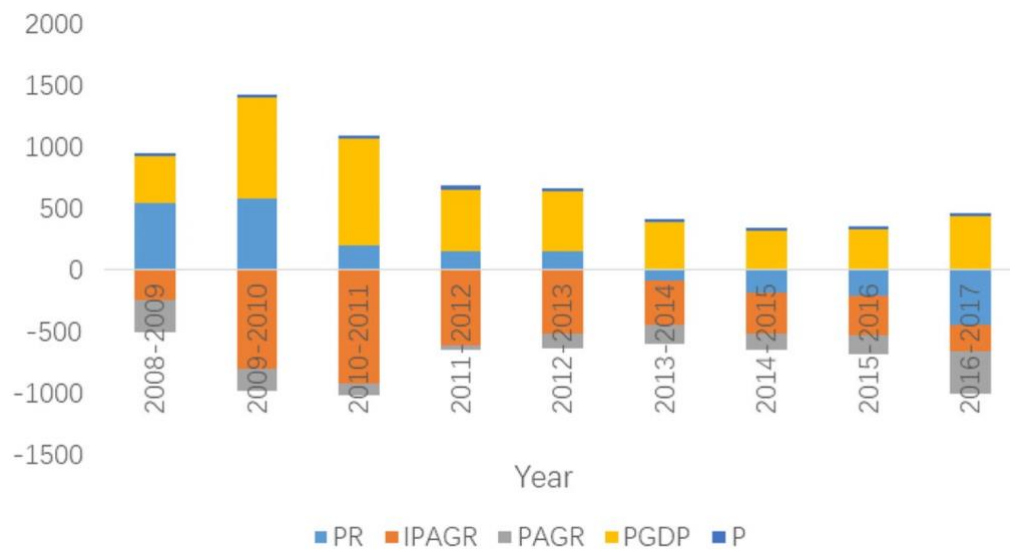


Fig. 2, Effects of various decomposition factors on the number of rural poor from 2008 to 2017¹¹

Chen, Rong, and Song continued to decompose their analysis using the grey relational analysis to reveal the impact and contribution of each factor to changes in rural poverty (Table 1). Overall, except the total population contributes less to rural poverty, at the rate of 0.6549, all other four factors have a contribution more than 0.8, which means they played an important role on the changes in rural poverty in 2008 to 2016.

Influencing factor	<i>PR</i>	<i>IPAGR</i>	<i>PAGR</i>	<i>PGDP</i>	<i>P</i>
Relational	0.8392	0.8391	0.8392	0.8394	0.6549

Table. 1, the contribution of various decomposition factors to rural poverty. Data Source: The website of China's Ministry of Civil Affairs (<https://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjjb/qgsj/>) and the China Rural Statistical Yearbook (2009–2018)¹²

¹⁰ Chen, Rong, and Song, "Poverty Vulnerability and Poverty Causes in Rural China."

¹¹ Chen, Rong, and Song.

¹² Chen, Rong, and Song.

Noting it will be almost inevitable that the GDP per capita, rural agricultural outcome, and total population will continue growing in the following years, these factors would be continuing giving an upward pressure on the number of rural poor. China might have solved the poverty problem at the time they made their claims, but as these sources of poverty have not been dealt with and solved, it's hard to conclude that the effect of the poverty alleviation would continue to last. Thus, the legislators must come up with some counter approaches towards these upward pressures, and to make the progress made in the poverty alleviation campaign truly sustainable.

The Poverty Returning Problem

Chen, Rong, and Song continued to argue that the vulnerability assessment of rural poverty would be an important scope of related research. They found a study that shows while 66.2% of the poor in China were lifted out of poverty, about 50.5% of those re-emerged as poor in 2009¹³. They employed an entropy method and a sustainable livelihood analysis proposed by DFID and assessed poverty vulnerability in China's rural areas based on five dimensions: natural resources, human resources, physical assets, financial assets, and social resources. The higher the degree of poverty vulnerability, the greater the probability individuals who had risen out of poverty will fall back into it when exposed to external shocks or risks¹⁴. The author of this paper argued that a shortage of natural resources is the main cause of long-term poverty.

Figure 3 below is an overall assessment on poverty vulnerability separated by the various provinces in 2016. There is a drastic difference in poverty vulnerability between the North-

¹³ Chen, Rong, and Song.

¹⁴ World Bank, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020*.

western parts of China and the South-eastern parts of China, where the areas with the most serious rural poverty vulnerability are concentrated in western China.

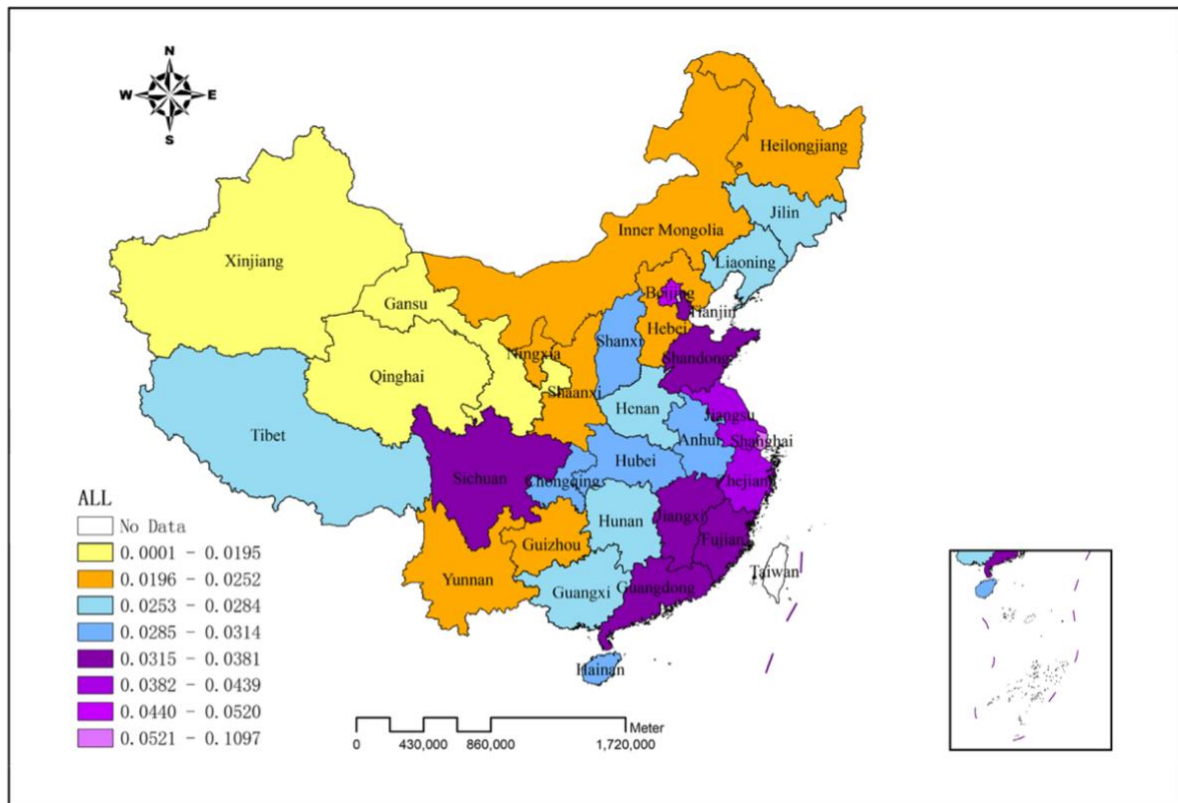


Fig. 3, Vulnerability assessment of rural poverty in various provinces in 2016¹⁵

Through the authors' analysis of the vulnerability assessment of rural poverty of each livelihood asset, they found that most of the areas with the most serious rural poverty vulnerability are serious in the rural poverty vulnerability of natural resources, especially in Xinjiang, while the scores of other livelihood assets in these areas are also low. They argued that thus the lack of natural resources is the root cause that the areas having lower scores in terms of material and financial assets¹⁶. In relation to our investigation, we could conclude that those provinces who were drawn to poverty by their lack of the natural resources would find it very hard to keep them out of poverty in the long term, as the number of natural

¹⁵ Chen, Rong, and Song, "Poverty Vulnerability and Poverty Causes in Rural China."

¹⁶ Chen, Rong, and Song.

resources is a factor that could not be changed easily by human forces, and once the favourable policies are out of the place, they would easily fall back to poverty.

Li, Su and Liu who conducted a survey and research paper under the approval of the state council also agreed on the point that the newly poverty alleviated households are very vulnerable to return to the previous impoverished situation when there are unexpected disasters, severe illnesses, disabilities, and the deaths of household income earners¹⁷. Figure 4 is the poverty returning rate provided by this national-wide survey covering 2075 households of 9 contiguous poverty-stricken areas.

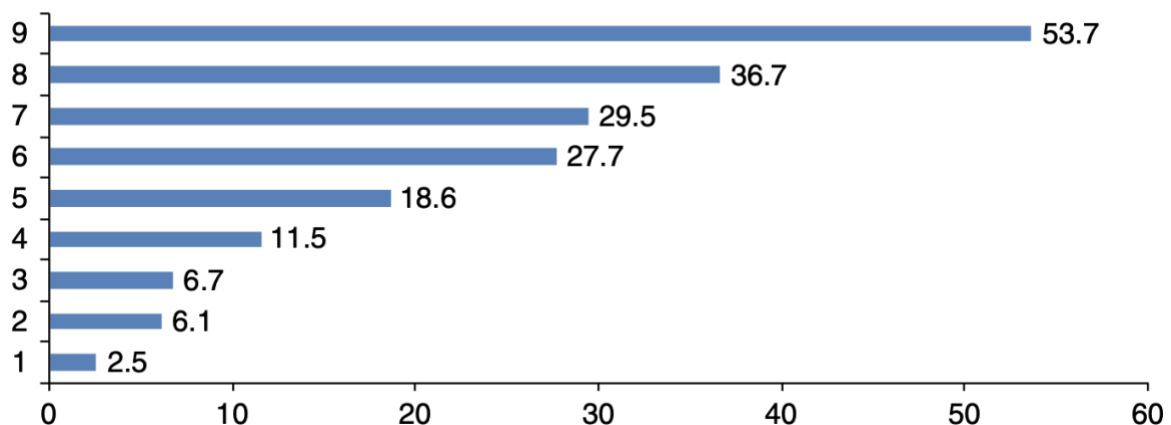


Fig. 4, The poverty returning rate in the contiguous poverty-stricken areas(%). Notes: (1) Wumeng Mountainous area; (2) Dabie Mountainous area; (3) Border area of western Yunnan Province; (4) South area of Daxing an Mountains; (5) Wuling Mountainous area; (6) Luoxiao Mountainous area; (7) Qinba Mountainous area; (8) Yanshan-Taihang Mountainous area; (9) Liupan Mountainous area. The calculation of the poverty-returning rates was made according to the statistics of the number of poverty-alleviation people and poverty-returning people in the villages in the years 2012, 2013, and 2014. The statistics were collected by the answers from the village cadres.¹⁸

While the poverty returning problem was recognized by several scholars from different cultural backgrounds, it could be argued that the high poverty-returning rate was due to the incorrect methodology that was employed on the previous poverty alleviation works. On the other hand, Li, Su and Liu argued that the different focus and unique path taken by the

¹⁷ Li, Su, and Liu, "Realizing Targeted Poverty Alleviation in China."

¹⁸ Li, Su, and Liu.

government would solve the poverty sickening problem in the rural areas. They argue that the policy CCP has implemented on this campaign highlighted the importance of accurate measures of poverty identification, appropriate projects arrangement, and accurate implementation effect to ensure that assistance reaches poverty-stricken villages and households¹⁹, which is focusing directly to the factors mentioned above, and thus would solve the poverty problem in the long term.

¹⁹ Li, Su, and Liu.

The Chinese “Campaign Style Mobilization” and its Impact

This section is first going to focus primarily on the unique method of government and bureaucracy operation arrangement that was taken by the Chinese Communist Party during this Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign of the Xi era, which Smith Graeme in his work *The Campaign Rolls ON: Rural Governance in China under Xi Jinping and the War on Poverty* characterized as a “campaign style mobilization²⁰”. I’m going to analyse its strength and weakness while cross referencing with the primary anecdotes from the *targeted poverty alleviation subtieba* on the Chinese social platform, *Baidu Tieba* (百度贴吧)²¹. Which, despite being under the regulation of the Chinese government and established within the Chinese firewall, surprisingly offered me access towards voices from the people who were directly involved and at the frontline of the Chinese Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign.

The Unique Form of Bureaucratic

The Communist Party of China (CPC) officially shifted from a revolutionary to a ruling party in 2005, and Smith argued that this was supposed to be a signal of it moving away from its traditional reliance on campaign-style governance and committing a more managerial and technocratic approach to governance²². However, Smith continues to argue that the old habits persist 16 years later, that the CPC at the local level is still a party addicted to campaign-style mobilisation, and the governing elites are still heavily favoured “rapid, visible, and quantifiable” approaches and technologies.²³

²⁰ Smith, “The Campaign Rolls On.”

²¹ “Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧) tieba.Baidu.Com.”

²² Smith, “The Campaign Rolls On.”

²³ Smith.

Smith argued that the raise of Party-led small groups provides evidence of a shift of power from the government to the Party. He continued to argue that the small groups has made what was formerly an informal institutional arrangement formal, that the small groups would be an indication to township government workers regarding which tasks the township Party secretary had given top priority and acted as a formal cover for the campaign-style mobilisation of government staff, and all the township government staff, as well as the leading cadres would be drawn into the task of the period, pursuing in a whole-of-government manner.²⁴

Not only did Smith showed a critical approach towards this phenomenon, Zhao Shukai, a researcher from the State Council's Development Research Center also showed his criticism towards this structure:

A feature of these “campaigns” is that they do not harness civil society; the state employs administrative force to create a “government movement”. Leading cadres use inspections, assessments, and competition between officials; there is a lot of colour and movement as propaganda starts up; and the results are announced with fanfare. At the end of the campaign, everything is wonderful on the surface, with lessons learned and breakthroughs achieved...²⁵

Talking about this Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign specifically, I would argue that the CPC had used this campaign as a chance to restructure and infiltrate the rural bureaucracy through the establishment of the type of governing style discussed in the previous paragraphs. In August 2015, the Poverty Alleviation Office was merged with the Reservoir Resettlement

²⁴ Smith.

²⁵ Zhao, “赵树凯：地方政府公司化：体制优势还是劣势？_爱思想” “Difang Zhengfu Gongsihua: Tizhi Youshi Haishi Lieshi?” (The Corporatisation of Local Government: A Strength or a Weakness of the System?).”

Bureau to create a new entity known as the Poverty Alleviation, Relocation and Development Bureau (扶贫移民开发局), the first country in the prefectural to do so. At the time, this Reservoir Resettlement Bureau was among the country's most desirable bureaus to join at the rural areas in China²⁶. Thus, I argue this would be an indication sent from the CPC to local officials that the rural alleviation would now be equally important and would be the area with most potential in the government sector. Moreover, I believe this unique form of bureaucracy has completely changed the motivation and the attitude of the government users, which is evident from Smith's working paper where he argued that party secretaries will be doing whatever they can to make their achievements visible to their superiors²⁷. Thus, this nature of the China's poverty alleviation campaign has made the poverty rate figures suspectable for doubts as how this campaign has been raised to a stage where no local officials can take the responsibility of failing it.

The Campaign Logic

"Weberian bureaucracies may like to govern, but parties like to campaign²⁸", Smith said. He argued that this Targeted Poverty Alleviation campaign, despite its unpopularity among cadres and the owners of restaurants and hotels, is likely to enhance the legitimacy of the Party - at least at the national level- in the eyes of ordinary citizens. The persistence of mobilisation gave pre-eminence to the Party and catching up with the reality on the ground in rural China²⁹. It is a merger, if not integration, of the government to the Party.

²⁶ Smith, "The Campaign Rolls On."

²⁷ Smith.

²⁸ Smith, "The Campaign Rolls On."

²⁹ Smith.

There was an enormous amount of pressure that was put on the cadres during this campaign. The leaders of 22 provinces in central and western China were required to take a “military pledge” to complete the task, and thus held directly responsible for meeting the target of lifting all rural residents out of poverty by 2020³⁰. Xi Jinping even stressed again on the seriousness of the “military pledge” in a speech to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection in case the pledge has been used too much so it lost meaning, that, “The military pledge is not something that is casually laid down, we will do what we say.”³¹

Because of the strictness of the inspection, how the policies were implemented was very rigid and indeed quite impractical, which further lessen the credibility of the sustainability of this campaign. As I have explained in the previous section, some of the impoverished households were caused by difficulties that made it almost impossible to escape the trap, instead of sudden accidents. While the intention of the CPC to implement industrial poverty alleviation was good and follow the objective of sustainable development, the Campaign style and how the numbers was closely relating to, if not deciding, the promotion route of the local officials made this preference a backlash when implemented. The user “mazaven” on the poverty alleviation thread, who claimed to be one of the officials actually implementing the policies, complained,

“A lot of poor households do not have any members that have the ability to work, thus we can't alleviate through industry development; there're also a lot of people who are mentally or intellectually disabled, so we can't alleviate poverty by finding them jobs. I hope the leadership would not ignore the specific situation of the

³⁰ Smith.

³¹ Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.”

impoverished households and require us to alleviate them through industrial methods only.³²”

Another user named “30280813”, who also claimed to be one of the government officials, said,

“I feel like we are all just faking it every day, just to cope with the inspection. Now they are going to have an inspection, so we have to work around the clock now³³”

While another mobilisation tactics employed by CPC is sending country-level cadres to serve as village Party secretaries³⁴, this also caused much discontent among the bureaucratic, especially the basic level who must stay in the villages that’s 4 or 5 hours of drive from their house 5 days a week for the entire campaign season. For them, getting appointed to the local villages also means they were away from their normal position in their original government sectors which would make the discontent further. After Xi announced that implementation of the Rural Revitalization program, “起承转合(Qichengzhuanhe)” complained, “It's bitterly disappointing, after the poverty alleviation campaign now it's the village revitalization campaign that I have to continue station in the village³⁵.” Thus, it is doubtful whether the implementation of the policies and help from the local bureaucracies on the Poverty Alleviation would be maintained at the same level after the attention of the central CPC shifted their focus to a new target, as they will very possibly get demotivated.

³² mazaven, “mazaven at the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign Thread.”

³³ 30280813, “30280813 from the.”

³⁴ Smith, “The Campaign Rolls On.”

³⁵ 起承转何, “起承转何 from the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign Thread.”

Conclusion

Despite that the Poverty Alleviation Campaign in 2015-2020 has shifted its target from the country and the village to the individual and the household, which would be helpful, the “Campaign Style Mobilisation” has made the success of the Campaign very delicate. As I have argued in the previous section that GDP growth does not necessarily lead to the decrease in the poverty rate of a nation, the number of alleviated impoverished household could not serve as a proof for development or long-term alleviation of poverty, as they are very vulnerable to returning to poverty. Moreover, as the success was pronounced, the focus of the party will be drastically shifted to other areas. The cease of aids in terms of favorable economic terms, manpower, and public attention would very probably trigger the poverty returning in many parts of china, especially those areas where the root of poverty has not been solved upon, and thus I believe China’s poverty alleviation Campaign of 2015-2020 has very limited amount of sustainability.

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30280813. “感觉每天都在造假，就是为了应付检查，以前没有要求的，现在要检查了，就叫你没日没夜地加班补 I feel like we are all just faking it every day, just to cope with the inspection. Now they are going to have a inspection, so we have to work around the clock now.” *精准扶贫吧 the Targeted Poverty Alleiviation Campaign Thread* (blog), December 22, 2019.
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- mazaven. “贫困户很多都是没有劳动能力，不存在产业扶贫，也有很多是智力或者精神残疾的，也不存在扶贫扶志，希望上面的领导不要不看对象情况，要一律要求扶贫扶志，要求产业扶贫，要求就业培训。 A lot of poor households do not have any members that has the ability to work, thus we can’t do alleviation through industry development; there’re also a lot of people who are mentally or intellectually disabled, so we can’t alleviate poverty by finding them jobs. I hope the leaderships would not ignore the specific situation of the impoverished households and require us to alleviate them through industrial methods only.” *精准扶贫吧 the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign Thread* (blog), August 24, 2020.
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