

The Fight Against Poverty: a “Political” Puzzle

On Monday, 3 September 2018, Xinhua News Agency reported these figures as published by the National Bureau of Statistics on the same day:

“China lifted 740 million people in rural areas out of poverty from 1978 to 2017, roughly 19 million each year... Over the past five years, over 68 million people were lifted out of poverty in China. The country aims to further lift 10 million people out of poverty this year and eradicate poverty by 2020.”

Throughout President Xi Jinping’s first five-year tenure (from 2013 to 2018), the “core leader” of the party-state apparatus has repeatedly cited poverty alleviation (*fupin*), as one of China’s “three tough battles” for the next years, along with risk prevention and pollution control.

Xi Jinping first raised the idea about the targeted poverty relief strategy as a priority in November 2013 when he visited a village in Huayuan County in Hunan Province. He then expounded the strategy and the basic requirements, while presiding over a symposium on poverty relief and economic and social development in Guizhou Province in June 2015. The commitment was repeated at the end of the 13th National Party Congress on March 20, 2018. In fact, China aims to eliminate absolute poverty by 2020 in a bid to create a “moderately prosperous society.” To achieve this, Xi Jinping relies on CPC’s leadership, extraordinary measures, targeted strategies, strong financial support, and strict requirements for poverty elimination works.¹

In 2015 there were 70 million rural poor.² From 1978 to 2017, 740 million people were lifted out of poverty. So from 1978 to 2014 their number has been 670 million, with a yearly reduction of about 18.6 million, while from 2013 to 2018 the yearly average was only 13.6 million.

So what are the extraordinary results? Why is the press boasting about the exceptional measures launched by the campaign of Xi Jinping in 2015? The actual number of people lifted out of poverty has been declining. Therefore, it seems that Xi Jinping is making use of the campaign for his popularity and support. He is aiming at establishing a political legacy that is the merit of having built up a moderately affluent society by 2020 during his presidency. Indeed, the whole issue seems to exploit poverty alleviation as a political campaign in order to boost the political fortune and standing of Xi Jinping himself and of the Communist Party.

However, are the results of such a poverty alleviation campaign realistic?

Wang Sangui, a professor of rural affairs at Beijing’s Renmin University, with a more realistic approach to the issue, does not think that poverty alleviation efforts will come to a halt after the goals are reached. He said:

¹ Xinhua Net, June 3, 2018.

² Refer: Shi Li – T. Sicular, The Distribution of Household Income in China: Inequality, Poverty and Policies, in *The China Quarterly*, No. 217, March 2014, pp. 19-20).

*“The population in poverty and need will still exist in some form and the Chinese government will continue the work. Even as basic poverty is eradicated, there will be relative poverty in different sections of society, which will need to be addressed.”*³

³ Hong Kong, South China Morning Post, 6 September 2017.