

40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up

# Govt seeks to eradicate extreme poverty

Since 2012, about 13m people a year have risen above poverty line amid Beijing's efforts

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In Dranang county (Tibet)

With a bag of fertiliser slung across his back and a shovel in hand, 41-year-old Pubu Langjie tended to the endless rows of liquorice and fruit tree saplings that have only recently been planted across the arid soil of Dranang county.

It's tiring work under the scorching Tibetan sun, but Mr Pubu, formerly an itinerant worker, is glad for the job, which was offered to him after he relocated from his remote mountain top home 30km away.

"It pays 4,000 yuan (S\$8796) a month, about the same as my previous odd jobs, but the work is easier and much more stable," he said, adding: "No longer worry when I'll send my next pay cheques."

Indeed, the success stories of those like Mr Pubu is why China has pushed for drastic solutions like relocation in its war against poverty, which Beijing has intensified after president Xi Jinping came to power in 2012.

This year alone, China will relocate 2.8 million poor people, part of an urbanisation push to move 100 million villagers to cities by 2020.

Nearly four decades after Beijing began tackling the deep-set problem of destitution, Mr Xi vowed in 2015 to completely eliminate extreme poverty in China by 2020.

Even before that goal is reached, China has played an outsized role in the global reduction of poverty.

In 1978, over 90 per cent of China's population of one billion were considered poor. Now they are considered indigent, living under the extreme poverty line set by the World Bank that today is US\$1.90 (S\$2.60) a day.

Then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping unleashed reforms that same year that ranged from ending rural farming communes to designating special economic zones in coastal cities that saw a flood of foreign investment. The measures ushered in an era of roaring growth that saw per capita income soar 16-fold in the next three decades, noted World Bank country director for China Bert Hofman. The result was over 700 million people escaping poverty, nearly half of global poverty reduction then.

The calculation of economic liberalisation for rural areas in coastal cities in recent decades – even as agricultural land reform slowed – meant the rural poor have stayed a stubbornly difficult problem for Beijing.

As of this year, there are still 30 million poor living in the world's second largest economy.

Mr Xi, who has lied his performance and that of local officials to ensuring no Chinese remains under the poverty line after the 2020 deadline, has spared no expense.

The central government budgeted over 106 billion yuan (S\$21 billion) in its special fund for poverty alleviation this year, a dramatic seven-fold rise in just one decade.

But why is defeating poverty of such importance to Mr Xi and the



Farmers Lamo Yozhong (far left), 33, and Tanzing Laju, 49, in a greenhouse where they work in Donggai county. The project is an investment by the local government aimed at paying 3,000 yuan a year to each of the 120 villagers.

Students at Lhasa No.2 Secondary Vocational and Technical School in Lhasa City (below) learn basic vocational skills like assembly-line work at a mock factory. Their courses are fully subsidised by the local government.



**2.8 million**

Number of poor people who, this year alone, China will relocate, as part of an urbanisation push to move 100 million villagers to cities by 2020.

**30 million**

Number of poor people still living in the world's second largest economy, as of this year.

**\$21 billion**

How much China's central government has budgeted in its special fund for poverty alleviation this year, a dramatic seven-fold increase in just one decade.

## Controls aimed at possible threats to party's authority

FROM B7

like Japan and Singapore, said Professor Dru Gladney of Pomona College in the US.

This led to a fascination with religion among the Chinese, he added.

As China loosened its *hukou* or residential permit system to allow internal migration to facilitate eco-

Second-year student Ciwang Nazha, 18, of Chaxa No.2 Secondary Vocational and Technical School engaging in Thangka (Tibetan Buddhist) painting alongside other students. ST PHOTOS: LIM YAN LIANG

Alleviation and Development.

One reason for the successes is that Beijing has now located its policies and learnt from past mistakes, such as the wholesale relocation of villages without putting in place sufficient support networks, community services and jobs.

Schemes to help farmers get loans and the expertise to tap local conditions and specialities have been expanded to maximise returns from agriculture, such as rare black bee honey in frigid Hengliang, kiwi fruit in Sichuan, or mulberry to make artisanal paper in Guizhou.

Such is the case in Nado village in the Wenshan Zhuang and Miao autonomous region of Yunnan, one of the poorest provinces. In 2016, 70 mud shacks with erratic power and water there and in nearby villages were transformed – free of charge – into charcoal-brick homes. Dirt roads were cemented over, and solar street lamps were installed.

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ting desertification by planting crops like desert peach and sand and rockham in Ningxia and Mongolia.

Where feasible, Beijing has encouraged rural communities to stay put by spending big to upgrade homes and basic infrastructure in the villages, ensuring even those living in remote places have access to water, electricity, roads, mobile networks and services such as medical care and education.

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With China's greater focus on high-quality growth and environmental protection, more firms are tapping local unskilled labour in ecologically vulnerable places that often also have poverty problems, said Mr Liu. These include combat-

ting desertification by planting crops like desert peach and sand and rockham in Ningxia and Mongolia.

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Chinese society, such as the urban-rural divide. Those living in cities makes up over 60 per cent of the income of those in rural areas.

And China's Gini coefficient – a measure of income inequality – has climbed rapidly in the last two decades to between 47.3 and 50 points, among the world's highest.

Ms Hannah Ryder, who heads an international development consultancy in Beijing, noted that with China's push to have one billion people living in urban areas by 2030, the gap with those "left behind" in the countryside – who are mostly the elderly and children – is likely to grow starker.

Further *hukou* (residential permit) reform to prevent discrimination against farmers migrating to the cities, coupled with financial incentives to return to rural areas and

better redistribution of wealth and resources in the rural areas will be needed, she told CGTN, a Chinese state channel.

Experts stressed that eliminating extreme poverty, while laudable, is just a first step. Mr Horfert estimated that some 54 million Chinese will still be classified as "population vulnerable to poverty", living on US\$3.10 a day or less.

Some local governments, for instance, are already looking at a higher poverty line of 4,500 yuan in annual per capita income compared to the current 3,000 yuan.

"China is carrying out poverty alleviation work in an evidence-based manner, learning from methods abroad while formulating policies based on closely monitored results, so I'm confident we will succeed in erasing poverty for the long term," he said.

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per cent a year since 1980. According to Freedom House, there are 250 million Chinese Buddhists, eight million Tibetan Buddhists, 80 million Protestants, 12 million Catholics, 23 million Muslims and 20 million Falungong followers.

However, as the numbers grow, control over religious practices has been tightened in recent years.

Said the Freedom House report: "Since Xi Jinping took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2012, the authorities have intensified many of their re-

strictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution."

These include restrictive new laws; expanding targets of repression to include previously tolerated activities and individuals; increased state intrusion in daily life such as constraining of children's religious education and participation; and use of electronic surveillance at places of worship.

Said Prof Liang: "The recent hardening of the religious policies reflects the state's increased fear that religion can undermine the state's con-

## Public foundation gives poor kids a leg up

In an age of talking books and flashy toys, a sock puppet and a plastic bottle feel like poor substitutes for holding a toddler's attention.

But two-year-old Xu Qirui was spellbound by his new toy – fashioned out of the bottle and with the puppet "driver" at the wheel – a gift from a home educator who visits him every week. "She always goes in the opposite direction from me! Clever boy!" encouraged Ms Gu Qiaomei, 33, the educator.

As Qirui raced around his cave home in mountainous Qiaochuan township of Huachix county in Gansu – one of China's poorest provinces – Ms Gu taught his grandmother and caregiver Ren Hongnu, 46, how to turn the toy into sessions of directed play that would teach the toddler six concepts: go, stop, accelerate, slow down, far and near.

"You can ask him to pull faster, and slow down, and over time he will understand speed," said Ms Gu.

Qirui is one of 60 million "left-behind" children in China – young people growing up in the care of illiterate grandparents in rural areas as their parents have left for the cities for better jobs there.

As China realises the importance of early childhood education in breaking the poverty cycle across generations, there is increasing attention given to bringing such education to children like Qirui.

Between the ages of zero and three is when the brain undergoes critical neurodevelopment, said Mr Lu Mai, secretary general of the China Development Research Foundation (CDRF), a public foundation. Studies have shown this is a critical time for learning.

While practices such as reading



Home educator Gu Qiaomei playing with two-year-old Xu Qirui as his grandmother, Madam Ren Hongnu, looks on. ST PHOTO: LIM YAN LIANG

## Development boost for Gansu kids



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working with CDRF, comes in. For an hour each week, she visits nine children in the county, many living in remote mountain villages. She plays games, draws and sings with them.

She also teaches their caregivers better ways to interact with the children, aged from six months to three years.

The pilot programme in Huachix, which started in 2015, saw early fruits just one year in: A survey showed that developmental risk was cut by half while the family environment of most of the toddlers had improved.

The programme has since been expanded to the rest of Gansu as well as Guizhou, Xinjiang and Qinghai, some of China's poorest areas.

Lim Yan Liang

## Dance as passport out of poverty

With arms interlocked and laughing as they kicked their heels to the rhythm of a three-string lute, the dozen young girls of the Yi minority group showcased their traditional ethnic dance, an art form that had nearly disappeared in their small mountain community.

But the brave smiles of those like Zhang Yuqian, 12, masked apprehension, as the dance item was part of a competition that marked a new chapter for the next generation of remote Nado village, which in the Yi dialect means "paddy fields hidden behind the mountains".

Yuqian, together with 54 other children, would travel nearly 350km the next day – the farthest she would ever be from home – to begin her schooling in the provincial capital Kunming. She would not see her parents for the next six months while studying at Kunming Art School.

"I'm worried that I may not fit in in the city, but I'm also happy because it shows that Teacher Zhang and Teacher Guan's instructions have not been wasted," she said.

The two teachers are choreographers of the Kunming Pingxiang Ballet Teacher Guan Yu with the prestigious Beijing Dance Academy, who in 2016 began the Rainbow Project. This is a ground-up initiative that seeks to lift minority children in Yunnan's Wenshan Zhuang and Miao autonomous prefecture, of which Yuqian's village is a part, out of poverty through the arts.

There are no records of anyone from the village, one of the poorest in the region, completing a degree or diploma. The traditional career path, after completing secondary school, is that of a migrant worker working in a low-paying service or manufacturing job in

one of the nearby cities. The Rainbow Project hopes to change this.

Last year, Mr Guan and Ms Zhang raised funds to send four children from Nado to Kunming

Art School after the quartet passed its rigorous entrance examinations, following weekly dance lessons with volunteer teachers from local schools.

Despite the odds, the students

## A better future through the arts



Girls from Nado village with their admission papers into Kunming Art School, one of the most prestigious dance academies in the province. ST PHOTO: LIM YAN LIANG

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did well enough that the school and its affiliate, the Yunnan Art School, offered another 51 scholarships this year, Ms Zhang said.

But there were some problems too. There were a few instances of truancy, which was eventually traced to difficulties adjusting and homesickness, Mr Guan said.

"The city moves at such a fast pace, unlike back home, that sometimes I miss the simple life I had of picking mushrooms and grazing the cows," said 14-year-old Wang Shiyi, one of the four children.

Lim Yan Liang

the hardest-hit religions, he added, are Tibetan Buddhism, Islam in Xinjiang region and Christianity in general. In particular, as many as one million Muslims – mostly from the Uighur minority group – in Xinjiang have been sent forcibly to re-education camps in a bid to "de-extremify" them, a move that has been condemned by the United Nations.

The Chinese government has defended the camps, saying they are vocational training centres meant to deal with Islamic extremism.

Controls aimed at possible threats to party's authority

In cracking down on religion, however, the government is depriving it of societal resources to cope with an array of problems and needs faced by the people, from earth-quake relief to care for the poor or jobless or the disabled or mentally ill, said Prof Liang.

This is because religious communities have provided many services and met both the material and emotional needs of the people beyond what the state is capable of doing.

Religious control exacerbates popular distrust and resentment against

the government and "will inevitably sow the seeds of radical or eschatological religion which will turn believers against the government", he warned.

Ms Aileen Li (not her real name), 40, a marketing executive and a Christian, said that while the government's harsh actions may yield results in the short term, it is impossible to control religion for long.

"This is because it runs counter to the needs of the people," she said.