

(January 2020, on the “deciding year” of announcing the full establishment of a moderately prosperous society, the author of this article traveled to a deeply poor area in the Northwest, through investigating the implementation of the Targeted Poverty Alleviation program, seeks to present the reader with some of the challenges still faced in the practices of the poverty alleviation program.)

Note: to protect the privacy of the interviewees, all they names in the article are alias



### **“Bitterest and the most barren land under heaven”**

The first site of investigation is Xi village, during the Qing dynasty, this place was called the “Bitterest and the most barren land under heaven”. 1972, this area was deemed one of the most inhospitable places on earth by the WFP.

Xi village has 9800 mu of land, a river flowing from the south to the north, dividing the village into two parts in the east and the west. Xi village has 650 households, 2389 people (data from 2015). Geographically, in the West and South of Xi village the land was covered in uneven creeks and trenches, the village sits at 2809-2272 meters

above sea level. Xi village belongs in the temperate semi-arid climate zone, the winter is long and cold, windy, arid and with large evaporation. According to climate data, the annual precipitation between 1960 and 2010 was around 300mm, but the evaporation was as much as 1000mm, other natural disaster was also commonplace. As climate changes, light and medium droughts became increasingly more common and affected more areas. Between 1950s-90s, the participation in the southern mountain ranges decreased over time, sandstorm and drought pushed 80-100km south, the original grasslands were desertified.

Historically, Xi village is geographically isolated, for long time traveling was difficult, walking to the nearest county seat would take an entire day, "leave and return without seeing the sun", gale in the winter is so strong that people could barely walk. After the founding of New China, Xi village went through the land reform and the cooperative period, but due to frequent droughts, the yield of agricultural products were low, often only a few dozens of jin of wheat per mu, agricultural production was still reliant on the weather. In 1973, the state invested in digging the first pumping well in the village; also this year, electric lamps gradually replaced kerosene lamps that were used for a long time. In the first years of contracting production to the household(1982), the yield per mu and the income of villagers did not increase significantly, but in the late 80s, as chemical fertilizer became more widely used, yield of wheat increased significantly. Besides agriculture, making roof tiles and later the booming economy of working outside became the primary ways for villagers to increase their income.

After the Reform and Opening Up, in Xi village, poverty alleviation funds supported the construction of inter-county roads and roads in the village, repaired roads between households and workplaces. On agricultural production, of the 17 pumping wells for irrigation, 12 were funded by the poverty alleviation fund. Since 2010, villagers can receive 200 Yuan per mu of subsidy for mulch corn from the poverty alleviation fund, as well as subsidy for farming machinery and tools. Relying on industrial poverty alleviation plans of the local government, villagers can apply for subsidy if they raise cows or sheep, or when they plant grass for grazing. Through the ecological migration project, 80 households in group 5 and 6 can move from the mountain beam to flat land, they paid 12000 Yuan, and were given a three-room house built by the government, coupled with a water heater and a cowshed. Through the dilapidated houses renovation program, 73 households in Xi village now have new houses.

As I entered the fields, the first impression Xi village gave me was really good, at least on the face of it, the poverty alleviation program did change the entire village on a fundamental level, it's already hard to relate what I saw with Zuo Zongtang's comment of the "Bitterest and the most barren land under heaven". Walking in the village, thanks to the government's dilapidated houses renovation program, almost every household built a new house in recent years. There are no dirt roads, all the roads have solidified surfaces, and there are even street lamps. Every household has electricity and 4G connection, most of the households we visited have Internet and TV. The village director we lived with has coal heaters and toilets. It can be said that

the infrastructures of Xi village is virtually no different from a town, if we only look at infrastructures, full poverty alleviation in Xi village can almost be considered completed. However, besides the material improvements of infrastructure, the living realities are far more complex.

The situations in one household we visited:

Li, male, 62 years old, was a targeted poverty alleviation household that had been alleviated out of poverty, he is also a low-income household. Li has three sons, besides the second one the other two were married. His wife is 58 years old, she hurt her chest as a tree landed on her while she was helping someone else, the surgery cost 86000 Yuan, Li's family and the other family split the bill, costs of living during treatment was paid out of their own pockets, over 10000 Yuan, she is no longer able to work. Worse, Li's eldest daughter-in-law was diagnosed with womb cancer in 2008, just one year after marriage, the total treatment cost already exceeded 1 million Yuan, most of it was borrowed, but she still hasn't recover. Now a surgery costs 300 thousand Yuan, but the family is completely incapable of bearing that cost, and had to return home for more conservative treatments. Li farms 13 mu of land, he mainly plants corn and wheat, because Li is targeted for poverty alleviation, the government subsidized him for raising cows, 12000 Yuan in the first year, 9000 Yuan in the second year, now Li has 3 cows. Li's eldest son works in the local area.

As we can see, the costs from Li's wife and daughter-in-law far exceeds Li's family income, as a result Li is burdened with debts. China's poverty line is 2300 Yuan in 2011 constant prices, adjusted for inflation annually, the poverty line in 2019 is an

annual household income of 3747 Yuan. From this angle, Li's family is out of poverty. However, due to massive medical bills, Li's family is in fact struggling with food and clothing, they barely have any extra expenditure and would not dare to think about buying new clothes, Li's family still eats steamed bread made from coarse grains, rarely will there be vegetables, meat is almost never eaten, debt was in the hundreds of thousands, from this angle, Li is far from being alleviated from poverty. Li's nephew, who was present during the interview pointed out this fact with exaggerations, "the lifetime income of an old peasant cannot pay for one hospital visit!" The self-identification of "old peasant" and the tone of grief in his complaint about not being able to afford treatments linger in head.

### **Difficult to target poverty alleviation accurately**

2016 was the first year Xi village implemented the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Programs. First, Xi village excluded 9 types of households from the Poverty Alleviation program according to the document issued by the District Government; this is the "dead line" of the Targeted Poverty Alleviation. During the interview I learned that when entering data into the computer, households with these 9 types records cannot be entered, this is a very strict rule. In the practices of Targeted Poverty Alleviation, the concept of "poverty" was replaced with a set of identifications and operational methods:

Turning the state's 2300 Yuan poverty line into applicable standards, 9 types of people are excluded: The entire family lives outside for more than a year; contains members who work and is paid by the government; contains members working in

the two village level committees; contains family member who bought property in county level areas and above; contains members who bought automobile not used for production or business, or if the automobile is above 20000 Yuan; contains members who bought large or medium size agricultural machinery priced at 20000 Yuan or above; contains members who have businesses in central townships or county level, or above; contains members who run family farms or large farms; people who are no longer registered as farmers.

In the interviews I noticed that the process of targeting people for poverty alleviation is highly dependent on the elites in the village. Like how township, village leaders and cadres, as well as cooperating enterprises and villagers' team leaders describe the situations of the poor households.

In 2014, 164 households, 410 people were filed, with a poverty rate or 17.9% (the total farming population was 586 households, 2290 people in 2014). Through poverty alleviation between 2015 and 2019, now 166 households, 377 people are still filed, 114 households, 371 people are out of poverty, 2 households and 6 people are still in poverty, poverty rates dropped to 0.26%. 17 households out of the 116 were registered due to illnesses, this is not high at 15%. However, we found out during the interview that various acute and chronic illnesses affected peasants' lives far greater than this percentage. Illnesses in Xi village have 3 characteristics; first, cerebral ischemic stroke, myocardial infarction and cancers due to dietary structures are common. Second, due to a lack of effective health checks systems in the villages these illnesses cannot be identified in their early stages. Three, to save medical

expenditures, poor villagers in Xi village won't go to the hospitals even if they are sick, or choose to only get IV drips in rural health centers.

Of the 30 average villagers, a staggering 22 have someone with serious illness in their family, over two thirds. Heart disease, cancer, hypertension and diabetes are very common in Xi village. These diseases restrict the abilities to work for working age people on the one hand and on the other burden the poor villagers economically. Even though we interviewed people randomly, not according to any standards, the severity of the problem can still be seen.

Many family we visited have a "subsidies payment checklist", the upper part is the content and amount of the different subsidies, the lower part is the calendar for 2019. The peasants can inquire the amount and content of the subsidy; they can also use it as a calendar, one can say that it is very convenient. But in the interviews, I found out that even with this chart, the peasants rarely ever check it. First it's because the subsidies are determined by the village cadres, they can't just ask for subsidies based on this chart. Secondly, a sizable number of poor households are not targeted for poverty alleviation, so they have no use for this chart.

**决胜脱贫攻坚 精准扶贫 共享全面小康**

**到户项目补贴标准一览表**

序号	项目名称	补贴标准	备注
1	新型农村合作医疗	每人每年120元	
2	城乡居民基本养老保险	每人每月100元	
3	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
4	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
5	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
6	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
7	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
8	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
9	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
10	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
11	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
12	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
13	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
14	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
15	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
16	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
17	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
18	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
19	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
20	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
21	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
22	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
23	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
24	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
25	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
26	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
27	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
28	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
29	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
30	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
31	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
32	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
33	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
34	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
35	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
36	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
37	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
38	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
39	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
40	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
41	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
42	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
43	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
44	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
45	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
46	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
47	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
48	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
49	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
50	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
51	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
52	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
53	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
54	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
55	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
56	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
57	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
58	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
59	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
60	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
61	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
62	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
63	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
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68	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
69	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
70	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
71	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
72	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
73	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
74	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
75	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
76	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
77	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
78	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
79	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
80	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
81	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
82	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
83	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
84	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
85	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
86	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
87	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
88	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
89	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
90	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
91	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
92	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
93	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
94	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
95	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	
96	农村沼气建设	每户最高1000元	
97	农村电网改造	每户最高1000元	
98	农村危房改造	每户最高3万元	
99	农村饮水安全	每人每年100元	
100	农村道路硬化	每户最高1万元	

From the chart we can see that the various categories of subsidy and welfare in the Targeted Poverty Alleviation program is numerous, covering healthcare, education, military relatives, husbandry, plantation, etc. It covers Almost every field in a peasants' life. Especially in healthcare, besides the previous new rural healthcare system, the government also set up various welfare systems accordingly (major disease insurance, major disease healthcare supplementary insurance, emergency welfare, etc).

From a policy angle, this healthcare system for the poor prevented the vicious cycle of poverty-illness as much as possible, providing strong health guaranties for the Targeted Poverty Alleviation program. But what we found out in the interviews are far more complex.

**Poverty causes illnesses, and Vis versa**



During the investigation, I noticed that for the poor residents of Xi village, “disease” is one of their deepest experiences. For the elderly, nearly everyone is sick, so hospitalization and taking drugs also became an inseparable part of their experiences. One interviewee said: “I have heart disease, cerebral arteriosclerosis cerebral insufficiency, problems with my liver and my lungs, long story short, my body is riddled with illnesses!” Another poor person is even worse. Mrs. Lin got cervix cancer in 2007, according to the diagnosis from the local People’s Hospital, Mrs. Lin is also suffering from ureteral stent infection, senile cataract in her left eye, has intraocular lens in her right eye, arteriosclerotic vascular disease, liver cyst, as well as others.

On the other hand, it’s worth writing about the touching courage and resilience of the Xi villagers when faced with the uncertainty of death and disease. In 2018, Mrs. Lin’s cervix cancer spread, her life was in danger. The municipal hospital didn’t take her in. As she remember this past, Mrs. Lin’s eyes teared up.

“I told him to put me down; I’ll go with nature, its right if I’m gone. People die sooner or later, there’s nothing to worry about, and it’s fine. In Yinchuan only my husband accompanied my, god the hemorrhage, it covered the floor some were even lumps. I was bleeding out. I said to him that I am alive now, if I’m dead, leave me on the emergency room floor, here, wait for me to live to 2 am then call the kids. My husband said why won’t I shut up, I said at night the kids will be disturbed, if I live to 2 call the kids, if not just leave me here.....god I was dehydrating, I bleed out then started to lose water, I lost 30 jin that day.”

Mrs. Lin was not afraid of death in critical conditions, she worried about her husband and kids, she didn't want to drag them down. Then, a miracle happened, she lived.

"riddled with diseases" becomes a great obstacle for Xi villagers to get out of the poverty trap. I chose 3 typical cases in the interviews to analyse the problem of poverty trap due to diseases amongst the poor in Xi village. In these three cases, Mrs. Qin is not targeted for poverty alleviation, Mr. Gao and Mr. Sun is. I will compare Qin's household and the two households that were targets to discuss the characteristics of the Targeted Poverty Alleviation program in "identification" and "implementation. In the two targeted households, Sun got more benefits out of the health programs, Gao didn't get any, I will compare the two to try and understand the effects and limitations of the health programs.

### **Mrs. Qin's household**

The first person we saw entering the 69 year-old Qin's front door is her father-in-law. Due to heavy manual work when he was young, the old man has sciatica, he can't move his fingers. He recently got a surgery for throat cancer, he still need his son to suck the mucus out for him, even at night he must be accompanied. Even though the old man can't speak yet, he still tried to make us feel welcomed, and tried to say something to us, perhaps it was some welcoming words, his enthusiasm was touching. As he was leading us into the guest hall, Mrs. Qin walked out of the side room, at first glance she looks like the typical rural middle aged women, passionate and simple. Qin is 44 years old, she married to here from Zhonghe township a dozen li away. Her husband's name is Liang Lijun, he used to make rebar in the city, an

unskilled worker, they have two sons, both haven't started working yet. The elder one is in an internship in his secondary technical school, the younger son is 15 years old, he is in his third year in junior high school. We went to say goodbye a day before we left, and learned by surprise that her husband is hospitalized due to cerebral hemorrhaging, casting a dark shadow on the already in straitened circumstances. Qin had to leave behind her father-in-law who just went through surgery and her younger son who will be facing his senior high school entrance exam, and move to the city to care for her husband.

Qin's family only has one laborer, her husband, working as an unskilled laborer; he can earn just a little more than 100 Yuan per day, around 100 days a year, at the end of the year it's just a little more than 10000 Yuan. There are some dozen mu of land at home, she farms it with her husband, they plant 7 mu of corn, and the rest are winter wheat and potatoes for their own consumption. 10000 jin of corn yielded this year, 80 cents per jin, a total of 8000 Yuan, this doesn't take into consideration for seeds and chemical fertilizers, the profit is very little. At the end of the year Qin's family earns no more than 15000 Yuan, the income per capita is less than 3000 Yuan annually, lower than the 3747 Yuan poverty line in 2019. Looking at expenditure, the situations in the Qin family is even bleaker. Qin's mother-in-law passed away a year and a half later after her brain tumor surgery, her father in law also got a surgery for his throat cancer, this left behind huge debt for the family. As for the amount of debt, she said "I don't dare ask him, if you want to ask, he (the husband) will shout at you". The Qin family spends 70000-80000 Yuan building a house in 2017, their son spends

1000 Yuan a month in secondary technical school, plus 2000-3000 Yuan a year of “favor money”. As a result, the Qin family cannot cover their cost. Moreover, Liang Lijun suffering from cerebral hemorrhaging will no doubt struck a harder blow on this unfortunate family.

The Qin family is deeply mired in the vicious cycle of poverty and illnesses. Due to the sickness of the parents-in-law, Yang Chunmei and her husband cannot go to find jobs in the coastal cities, “bound up by sicknesses”. Also due to poverty, they have no money for health checks and so cannot be treated in the early stages, a lot of the time they “drawn out small illnesses, shoulder the major illnesses”, drawing small ones into major ones and major ones into deadly ones.

Policy wise the Qin family is not considered a low income family and is not targeted for poverty alleviation, so she cannot enjoy all the benefits and treatments regarding poverty alleviation. Qin don’t really understand why her family cannot apply minimum insurance. My guess is that the Qin family did not fulfill the one of the nine criteria because they own a car, I learned in the interview that Liang Lijun spent 30000-40000 Yuan on a Xiali car so he can travel to the cities more easily. The paradox is that the nine criteria that was meant to exclude local cadres from lining their own pockets with the poverty alleviation program ended up excluding a family that needed it, just because they have some special circumstances, this is an unexpected outcome of policy.

### **Mr. Gao’s family**

First time in Gao’s home, it gave me a sense of emptiness, besides the coal stove in

the middle of the room used for heating and a old TV, there was barely any other furniture. Even then, the room was clean and tidy, there was not much dust. Mr. Gao is 62 years old, thin, but he looks strong, you can tell that he is a peasant who does heavy manual labor all year. His wife is 58 years old, hunched back, but still has flexible legs. She got hit by a tree when she was helping someone, and cannot do any heavy manual labor ever since. The couple has three sons and one daughter, the eldest son is working in the city, his wife suffered from womb cancer for 10 years. Their second son is 34 years old, he works outside and hasn't got married. The youngest son works in Heilongjiang, married a Heilongjiang woman and seldom comes back. The daughter was married to Guizhou, she also seldom comes back. They have 13 mu of land, farming corn, wheat and potatoes; this is their only source of income.

Gao's wife was disabled due to an accident and cannot do heavy work ever since. According to Gao: "she was being a good person doing good deeds and ended up paying for it". His wife's disability due to the accident was certainly a heavy blow to the old couple, but even still, despite Gao sounded like he's complaining about the other family not covering the cost of living at all for her, he still thinks what she did was the write thing, because "farmers need others' help no matter big or small". He needs help from others and others need his help, there's a sense of "All for one, one for all" in what he said.

If his wife's injury was a heavy blow to the Gao family, his eldest daughter-in-law's womb cancer diagnosis one year after marriage is not only a disaster. From Gao's

calculations, the decade-long journey seeking treatments costed the Gao family 1 million Yuan (I confirmed this number repeatedly, it's hard to imagine how the Gao family came up with so much money), but the cancer is still uncured. In March, she went to a provincial hospital for check-ups, the surgery would have costed 300 thousand Yuan, with a very high risk. Out of options, they returned home to get conservative treatments because they cannot afford it, now they still need 7000 Yuan per month for the medicines. Gao's eldest son still works in the city, struggling to pay his debts.

From home to Yinchuan, from Yinchuan to Xi'an, the long journey to treat his daughter-in-law, Gao gradually began to understand many of the details and inner workings of our healthcare system. Gao believe there are several reasons why most of his daughter-in-law's medical fees weren't reimbursed: First, her treatments took place ten years ago, the reimbursement rate of the new rural cooperative medical system was low in general. Second, she was treated in the relatively well equipped Xi'an Xijing hospital, not a local hospital, so the reimbursement rate was low. Third, some imported drugs cannot be reimbursed, and local drugs were not effective in combating cancer. Fourth, for the new cooperative system to reimburse the cost she needed to be hospitalized, the money for the drugs were not reimbursed. Sadly, when the eldest son got his poor household identification (meaning higher reimbursement rate), the Gao family can no longer afford hospitalization. As for Band-Aid solutions like the major disease welfare, Gao said: "They talk about the major disease welfare, I couldn't even find them, you can go to their offices, but you

won't be able to find anyone.”

### **Mr. Sun's Household**

Sun is an industrious old man, 64 years old. He has a 57 year-old brother; their mother is 84 years old. Sun and his wife raised one daughter and two sons, the daughter and her husband had three daughters, but the first and second daughter both have cerebral palsy. The eldest son met his wife in a wedding after coming back from work in 2011, their daughter Fan Yifan is in first grade, primary school. They had a divorce before their daughter was even a year old, the eldest daughter-in-law had one marriage before and after this one, plus the 50000 Yuan bride price, gave Sun family the impression that she scammed them.

Sun planted a dozen or so mu of corn, raised five cows and transferred a dozen or so mu of land right, each mu earned him 3000 yuan per year. Other than that, he was assigned a job as the village's janitor, it pays 800 a month, this job is for poor household exclusively. The Sun couple has an annual income of almost 20000 Yuan, not much, but for the couple's daily expenditure and medicines it was enough. Sun's eldest son worked outside, now he is at home taking care of the kid, with basically no income. The youngest son works in Fujian, earning 5000 a month, sometimes even 7000, sadly this money cannot actually help the whole family. In the interview I learned that the youngest son rarely sent money home. He said that he spent 2-3 thousand on smoking and drinking, 10000 to come back home, where did this 10000 go, he can't explain. The comment on this person by Sun is “earned one dime but spent two”. So, for the Sun family, Sun's wage as the janitor and the profits from his

cows are the only major sources of income. His job came from the fact that he is deemed a poor household, and the policy of the Targeted Poverty Alleviation is that 3000 Yuan of subsidy is paid for every cow raised, so he received 15000 Yuan for the five cows, this is not a small number. It can be said that the Targeted poverty Alleviation program helped the Sun family hugely, without it, the Sun family will descend into deep poverty.

According to Sun, he lost 7-8 jin this year, he suffers from diabetes, his wife has hypertension, they take medicines all the time. The couple's latest hospitalization costed them some 8600 Yuan, but because they were poor household and were insured, they only paid some 2600 Yuan. But they aren't cured; they still have to take medicines. Health insurance only cover for less than half a year, the rest they have to pay out of their pockets, for the two it might cost them over 1000. Since they are poor households, the 280 Yuan medical insurance only costs 30 for them per year. Sun's granddaughter is in grade one in Xicun Primary school, thanks to the 9-year compulsory education, it costs virtually nothing. We can say that with this series of policies, the Sun family can steadily leave absolute poverty.

But Sun's daughter's family is not so optimistic. Her husband and second daughter were diagnosed with brain tumor, some 300 thousand was spent on surgeries, this is undoubtedly a huge sum of money. Not long after, she divorced her husband, he demanded the huge debt from the treatment to be paid, she is now working to pay her debts.

Sun's family was above average before; they built a living room in 1991, bought the



fourth TV in the village. But due to his granddaughter and ex-son-in-law's brain tumor (costing 300 thousand) and their own illnesses, plus his eldest son getting "scammed" ( 50000 in bride price but the woman divorced him after giving birth to one daughter), the conditions in the last ten years were deteriorating, owing more than 150 thousand, Sun said he owed "a butt load of debt". Even though he is a direct beneficiary of the Targeted Poverty Alleviation program (without it his situations will be far worse), he still feels "unsatisfied", he believed that the program should not just look at income, but expenditure too. Xi village was impacted severely by the tide of commodification; it seems like just over night, everything costs money now. this commodification increased expenditure far more than the increase in income due to outside job opportunities, mainly the expenditure come from housing, healthcare, education and wedding, and the expensive "favor money" each year, of course people don't have enough money to spend

### **Farming or working short-term**



In the ten-day long interview, when I asked about jobs of them and their family, the most common phrase I heard is “construction” and “unskilled”. According to incomplete statistics, more than half of the villager work in the construction industry, and in that more than half are unskilled. Compared to skilled laborers (bricklayers and carpenters), unskilled labor has three characteristics: First, they are replaceable and do simple tasks. They usually work as assistants for the skilled laborers, carrying ladders, drill holes on the ceilings and other manual labor.

So, by laying floor tiles, he’s able to earn 300-400 Yuan a day. Also from the investigation, I found that many were stuck being unskilled, due to a lack of vocational training, some Xi villagers are unskilled laborers for a long time, not able to become skilled, even for decade, like Gao’s nephew. Some people can learn from workmates or relative the skills for laying bricks and carpeting and become skilled. Second, the wages are low, skilled laborers can earn 300 even 500 per day while the wage of an unskilled laborer is pitiful, between 120-150 Yuan. Third, unskilled works are unstable, a day’s work for day’s pay, it’s very unstable. Poor households waver from farming for meager income and working temporary for low and unstable wages, they cannot give up farming due to the instability of temporary work (it will be difficult to farm again if the fields are abandoned), but also have to seek out temporary jobs because the farming income is too low. At the same time, agriculture and unskilled jobs cannot steadily pull people out of poverty, which is why poor households struggle around the subsistence line, not being able to reach moderate prosperity.

An old town renovation project was launched in 2015, tens of billions was invested into just one district, Xi village also began to renovate its dangerous houses, and started building cowsheds. While chatting with a contractor, he said that he thought locals were not as stable as outsiders, the youth workforce in Xi village have kids and elderly to take care of, they can't work for long periods of time, and had to run back when something happened at home, afterwards, the bosses didn't want to hire locals anymore. An interviewee said: "I didn't go out this year, my elders were sick" in order to explain why he didn't go out to find work. We can also imagine that this kind of "work three days and take two days off" attitude, and even not being able to leave due to illnesses, will not be accepted by construction teams that run around the country all year. There are however exceptions, when there are two sons in the family, one can go out and work while the other stays at home to care for the elderly and kids, like Sun's family. As a result, "zero hour economy" became the norm here.

More worryingly, construction companies in the cities are faced with the dangerous situation of broken capital chains, which results in unfinished buildings. City construction grinds to a halt, sometimes the awkward situation of the old houses being torn down while the new houses are not yet built happens.

In the interviews, many who went to the cities to find work often said that there were no work in 2019, and they don't know whether or not there will be work in the future. This says that many people will, or already have lost their job opportunities, in fact becoming "hidden unemployment" in the countryside. On the other hand, delaying wages for the contractors became common, many said that they "can't

asked for the money”, or that the money for this job will be paid when the next job is completed, sometimes they get paid for the first job after the third job is finished. In the foreseeable future, when the real estate bubble finally bursts, there is a danger of worsening total economic situations. This means that for the relocated households, contractors and workers, the commoners living in this area, the “bitter days” will come.

At the same time for the poorer villagers of Xi village, there are problems with not being able to become small workers. Xi villagers often have to make the difficult choice between agriculture and working outside. Like interviewee Li Hui’s wife, who gave up working outside because her labor is needed at home: “We need to farm our land, raise some sheep, there isn’t anybody else, just the two of us, getting grass, fodder, we still have to feed them, working, there’s not time for that.” At the same time, crops are unattended because his parent fell ill, Li Hui’s son was called back from Xinjiang, thus losing his opportunity to work and earn a wage outside.

### **Postscript**

According to national data, the problem of “poverty due to disease” and “reverting back to poverty due to disease” is still rather serious. The data from the State Council’s Poverty Alleviation files shows that 12.56 million household fell back into poverty in 2013, 42.4% of the filed poverty, this rose to 44.1% in 2015. 33% was because the illness impacted the ability to work, 12% was disastrous medical bills.

The policy of Targeted Poverty Alleviation did solve the dire survival problem of the poor population, but even if we can alleviate the peasants above the poverty line

through policy subsidies, and achieving the set goals of “poverty alleviation”, but the societal problem of poverty outside the scope of policy is still not resolved. I am afraid that problems not solved by targeted poverty alleviation cannot be solved by making more detailed policies. The perspective of “everything can be solved if we continuously improve our policies” precisely obscure the societal structural problem, like the small scale low return agriculture, as well as temporary work system that lacks labor protections.

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