

Reforming China's Anti-Poverty Policy from Below – Experiences from Western Hunan

Shih Chih-yu¹

Summary

The relationship between poor peasants and the state is derived from the unsuccessful introduction of competitive market exchange. The state intervenes unilaterally and in a top-down manner. This relationship creates mistrust and leaves poor peasants in a permanent state of poverty. The official anti-poverty (*fu-pin*) campaign is a source of income for the poor peasants, not a step toward modernization. To portray their seemingly dependent mentality as "cultural backwardness" misses the point, however, because the poor peasants' aim of squeezing as much as possible out of the state without being absorbed into the process of modernization is not specifically directed against modernization, but is a result of it. Peasants feel secure only when they can work as members of a collectivity in which everyone shares the burden and the profits equally. Expecting peasants to compete on the market as individuals can therefore only result in sporadic success. As for those who prefer to stay where they are in terms of income, neither the *fu-pin* teams nor the state willingly recognize their attitude as a legitimate option.

I. The Overall Policy Rhetoric

Economic development has been China's top priority since the 1980s. Imbalanced growth leading to the distorted distribution of wealth attracts the attention of leading state officials. Poverty in agricultural areas is believed to be hindering the country in its efforts to modernize itself. Following the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002, the newly inaugurated General Secretary, Hu Jintao, stated at the first session of the Politburo that dealing with poverty should be given top priority.² The *fu-pin* campaign (literally meaning "helping the poor")³ began in the mid-1980s and has faced serious bottlenecks for some time.

¹ The author is Professor of Political Science at National Taiwan University, Taiwan (R.O.C.) and is also affiliated to National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan (R.O.C.)

² See the news report by Wang Lichuan, "The Standing Committee of the Politburo on How to Benefit Disadvantaged People" (Zhengzhi juchanghui taolun zhaogu ruoshi zuqun), *United Daily* (2002.12.13): 13.

³ In the *fu-pin* project work teams from relatively affluent areas are sent to poor villages in order to help promote economic development. Typically, teams raise development funds, build roads, purify water, install electricity plants, and start up business projects.