



Giving a Hand

Companies promote drive for better life in underdeveloped villages By Li Fangfang

Ha Yuanmeng, a city dweller, had never been to a village before he took part in a poverty alleviation project in 2016. All his ideas about rural areas came from books and films. So when the bank he works for started the project in a village, where half the population lived below the national poverty line, he jumped at the chance to take part in it.

It took him 18 hours of train travel to get to Caijiang, a village in northwest China's Shaanxi Province, plus four hours by bus and two hours by car.

"There is a gap between my imagination and the reality in villages," Ha said.

Caijiang has over 700 households with nearly 3,000 people. In November 2016, when Ha first arrived there, nearly 450 households were impoverished.

In 2015, a national campaign started, sending young talents to impoverished villages to improve their condition. Nearly 459,000 people have gone to these villages as community-level officials to support the national poverty eradication drive.

President Xi Jinping outlined the work at a meeting on November 27, 2015. He said those young people would help village-level Party organization's poverty alleviation work by providing new resources and bringing a fresh mind.

"Those personnel including young talented cadres and university graduates should be well-behaved and competent," Xi said. "They should be appointed according to villages' situations."

Ha works as an accountant at China Construction Bank (CCB), one of the four largest state-owned Chinese banks. The CCB started its poverty alleviation campaign in Ankang, where Caijiang is located, in 1988. Currently, 16 CCB employees are assisting the

Ankang local government in the poverty alleviation work.

In the beginning, Ha didn't know a thing about poverty alleviation. But after three months of learning and investigation, he has picked up knowhow fast. His work includes exploring distribution channels for local products and work opportunities for local residents. He also tries to connect local youngsters to events in big cities.

The CCB helps sell local products such as mineral water and honey on its e-commerce platform to boost the development of Ankang's industries. In 2018, it donated over 10 million yuan (\$1.5 million) and lent 3.7 billion yuan (\$554 million) at a low interest rate. Altogether, it has provided training to 1,200 local people.

Role of education

Donations alone can't prevent people from falling into difficulties again, but education can. Education of both children and adults should be taken seriously, Ha said. According to him, children in villages should be educated, and adults motivated to undergo vocational training and gain some skills.

During the Spring Festival holiday in February, Ha accompanied a group of 40 students from Ankang to Shanghai, where a winter camp had been organized. It was the first time the middle schoolers saw the world outside their hometown.

"At first, they were silent and wary, which made me nervous," Ha admitted. "Then they began to relax, getting excited when they came across interesting things."

During the five-day trip, these students sent postcards and drew pictures. Ha noticed many of them were very talented. They were also confident and ambitious, something he hadn't



Ha Yuanmeng, an accountant-turned community-level official, talks to students at the Shanghai winter camp

expected. While visiting Shanghai Jiao Tong University, a student wrote in the comment book of the university's historical museum, "See you in six years," expressing a wish to come back as a student of the university.

Ha's first term as a local official in Ankang



Students from rural areas in Ankang City, northwest Shaanxi Province, at a winter camp in Shanghai in January



"I want to see the day when the poverty alleviation target in Ankang is finally reached," he said.

Rural Champion

Wu Bingying is a rarity, a college graduate in her village Xifeng in southeast China's Fujian Province. In the poverty-stricken village, people struggle to make ends meet. Wu first moved to the provincial capital, Fuzhou, in search of opportunities but then decided to return to her hometown as she didn't want to be separated from her child.

"Left-behind" children are a common phenomenon in rural China. Their parents leave for better work opportunities in bigger cities and the young children are left with their grandparents or others. This separated families and created a social dilemma.

After she went back home, Wu posted videos of her life in the countryside, rearing chickens and ducks, on live-streaming platforms. She also found another rewarding pursuit.

Gutian County, where Xifeng is located, is famous for its tremella. Wu used to wonder why the villagers couldn't make money by selling the prized specialty.

"We used to sell our tremella to middlemen who offered a low price. Then they deducted money from that for drying them. It squeezed out our profits," Wu said. Her next thought was, "Why can't I sell directly to customers through online platforms?"

In 2017, a video of Wu's tremella went viral with 400,000 views on Kuaishou, a video-sharing app. Many viewers commented that they would like to buy the product. So she started her online business selling on WeChat but didn't do well since the viewership on the social media platform was limited. Then she opened a Kuaishou account, which has a wider viewership.

"I sell my product at double the earlier price," she said happily. "I have asked other villagers to join me in packaging and logistics so that they can get out of poverty."

In the past year, over 16 million vloggers made money from Kuaishou. Of them, 3.4 million people came from areas that had an impoverished economy but were rich in natural resources, especially scenic beauty. These places can be promoted as tourist destinations or sellers of specialty products. Video-sharing apps have become the new way for people in these areas to market local products.

Some video-sharing apps, such as Douyin and Kuaishou, are running campaigns in cooperation with local governments. Douyin's Beautiful Scenes in the Mountains project aims to train locals in areas with tourism resources to shoot and share videos on the app, which gives them free publicity.

In September 2018, Kuaishou signed agreements with some local governments to provide online resources for developing e-commerce, education and ecology in more than 500 impoverished counties. The campaign, which has a traffic value of 500 million yuan (\$75 million), will end in 2020. The company is also choosing "rural champions" from local residents in these places to train them to become model rural entrepreneurs who would influence more people.

Wu is one of Kuaishou's beneficiaries. She was chosen due to her performance on the platform and recently, got her first training in Beijing. She was taught online and offline business management, online branding and how to be a rural pioneer to mobilize more villagers in income-generating projects.

"I feel entrepreneurship is no longer a remote possibility," Wu said. "I know that hard work can bring me a better life." ■

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ended after two years. Had he wanted, he could have gone back to Beijing to work in the bank's headquarters in 2018. However, he applied for another term, which means he will be in the city until 2020, the year for China to achieve the goal of attaining a moderately prosperous society in all respects.