

Two million to be moved in one of largest relocations in Chinese history

Two million people are to be moved from their isolated mountain homes as part of one of the single largest relocations in recent Chinese history. Tom Phillips reports.



The children of Longtan village are gearing up for the move and – their parents hope – for a brighter, urban future Photo: Tom Phillips for the Telegraph

By Tom Phillips, Wuling mountains, Guizhou province

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It is billed as the "final offensive" against extreme poverty in China's poorest province.

Between now and 2020, two million people are to be moved from their isolated mountain homes in Guizhou province as part of one of the single largest relocations in recent Chinese history.

It is a gargantuan task and one that will cost billions. But provincial authorities claim resettlement is the only way to eliminate the grinding rural poverty that continues to blight China's countryside even after one of the greatest economic booms in human history.

"Even if we build roads to reach them, provide drinking water to them and work to alleviate poverty there for another 50 years, the problem might not be addressed," Guizhou's party secretary, Zhao

Kezhi, said earlier this year.

"[The mountains] ... barely provide the conditions for sustaining life."

Decades of near-double-digit growth have propelled millions out of rural poverty, as migrant workers flocked to China's cities, pumping remittances back into the countryside, and the central government poured billions into rural infrastructure.

But all is still not well in rural China and as the curtains come down on the 10-year era of President Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao, alarm bells are ringing in Beijing about entrenched poverty and what many say is a growing wealth gap between urban and rural China.

A recent study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found that the urban-rural wealth divide had grown 26 per cent since 1997 and 68 per cent since 1985.

Last year, rural dwellers had an average annual disposable income of around £690, according to China's National Bureau of Statistics, compared to £2,170 for their urban counterparts.

"China has succeeded in making a bigger cake," state news agency Xinhua recently noted. "The problem now is how to divide it more equally."

The wealth gap is immediately clear in Guizhou province, where politicians pushing the relocation scheme say some 11.5 million people live below the poverty line, with around two million in "chronic poverty".

Outside the airport in its capital, Guiyang, a white-gloved chauffeur ushers a woman and her shopping bags into a black Rolls-Royce. But head northeast, deep into the Wuling mountain range, and a very different China is on show.

Declared a key anti-poverty "battlefield" by authorities, the Wuling region's isolated mountain villages seem a world away from the spectacular skylines of Shanghai or Beijing.

Sitting under the tarpaulin-roof of his improvised schoolhouse, Long Qingfu, the 37-year-old chief and stopgap teacher of Longtan village, said relocation could not happen soon enough. "Longtan needs poverty relief. We have very bad roads, you see. We have no tap water."

Mr Long pointed to the wooden wall behind him, onto which lessons were chalked in yellow and pink scrawl. "We have no blackboard," he explained.

Home to around 570 members of the Miao ethnic group, Longtan has a long and proud history. But despite their emotional ties to the land, many locals are ready to abandon their ancestral homes.

"We want to move," said Long Jinhua, 62, who was caring for her two-year-old granddaughter in the wooden house her family has called home for two centuries. Mrs Long said rural conditions had improved during the Hu-Wen era; roads had connected Longtan to the outside world for the first time, the price of grain had risen and her family had purchased a television set. But life was still a struggle. "I want to go to the city to experience a different life," she confessed, suggesting it might also help her two sons find wives.

For a glimpse of what awaits them, Longtan's villagers can travel 65 miles to Songtao, another county of ethnic Miao people, where relocation is already under way.

A roadside propaganda sign at the entrance to Yajia town reads: "TRY TO BUILD SONGTAO INTO A MODEL PLACE OF POVERTY RELIEF PROJECTS!"

On Ethnic Customs Street, Li Zhenze and his wife Chen Qunying showed off their brand-new second-floor apartment, fitted with all the trappings of urban life.

Natives of the nearby Ma'an village, they moved to Yajia with their three children in September, paying for the apartment with a government subsidy and personal savings.

"It's better than the countryside – but there is no land," said Mr Li, now unemployed and grappling with how to support his family in their new urban surroundings. Outside, an elderly settler used a wooden rake to dry grain on a brand-new concrete basketball court.

Ma Qingxin, the local Communist Party chief, said relocation had dramatically improved villagers' lives.

"Relocation is one effective way of poverty alleviation," he said, pointing to an industrial park and manganese processing plant being built near Yajia to provide jobs for the new arrivals. "Living is about [having] clothes, food, a home and access to transport. [But relocation] at least changes their poor living conditions. It is much better than living in the mountains."

Analysts agree that the next generation of Chinese leaders must take urgent action to address the wealth gap, viewed as a potential trigger for unrest.

"Hu Jintao did not do much [to stop the] gap increasing," said Mark Wang, a University of Melbourne

scholar and expert in rural China. "The gap is still huge and people feel angry. It's very dangerous for China. People expect [incoming president] Xi Jinping to fix the problem."

But for all the fanfare surrounding Guizhou's anti-poverty drive, not all see relocation as the best way to address the problem.

Some believe relocations exacerbate social tensions and can leave villagers even worse off, thrusting them into an unfamiliar world for which they were ill-prepared.

Several villagers even said they were unsure if their relocation was related to poverty relief or simply to clear the way for money-spinning infrastructure projects.

"Looking back at large scale population resettlements... since 1949, none have been very successful, and those started with very good intentions," said Jing Jun, a sociologist from Beijing's Tsinghua University and a leading authority on relocations.

"I don't know what will happen but there will be unintended consequences... Social engineering should really go through screening and consultation with the local people but I don't think the government is willing to do that."

Prof Wang said that while such resettlements were generally positive, the views and rights of those being moved needed to be respected.

"You are dealing with people. You are moving people, not cows or animals."

Simply moving people to new areas is not enough if they are not given the skills and opportunities to fend for themselves.

"If there is no dramatic change in the macro-system, if the distribution of wealth does not happen properly, the rural-urban gap will continue [to grow] and the rich-poor [divide] will continue," he said.

Such complexities are lost on the children of Longtan village, who are already gearing up for the move and – their parents hope – for a brighter, urban future.

Inside their tatty-school house, a student had inscribed one final farewell onto the wall. "Bye-bye," it read, in English.