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The end of poverty

by Xiaoyun Li, College of Humanities and Development Studies China Agricultural University, Beijing, China, China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITIC) Press, 2021, 78 RMB, about 10.8 USD, 272 pages, ISBN 978-7-5217-2946-7

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BOOK REVIEW

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1. Introduction¹

Why should human society fight against poverty? What are the different public values toward the poor and how do these values shape different poverty alleviation measures in different countries? What strategies and policies has China adopted in the last several decades, and why, to reduce the extreme poverty under the current national standards to zero by 2020? In addition, what interventions can an intellectual take for the poor besides doing conventional research through field interviews and publications? The book titled *The End of Poverty* by Prof. Xiaoyun Li is a must-read book to address the above four sets of essential questions. The book provides reflections on both deep thinking on political philosophy about poverty and vivid stories on the ground about how researchers can work and live together with poor farmers to overcome the threshold of the poverty.

The study of poverty crosses the boundaries of various social disciplines and is at the heart of development and agrarian studies, ranging from classic research into the root causes of poverty and inequality to cutting-edge debates on practical public policies to reduce poverty (Banerjee and Duflo 2011; Sachs 2005). As a super-norm of development governance and policies (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2011), eradication of extreme poverty is at the top of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The extreme poverty rate was reduced from over 50% in the 1950s to around 10% in 2018, which marks the dramatic progress of economic growth and development community (Roser 2021). Yet this optimism has been dampened by the stagnation and reversion in Sub-Saharan Africa and the South Asian countries, where the majority of the poor population resides. The recent pandemic shock, geopolitical turbulence, and economic recession aggravate the vulnerability of the poor. Therefore, how to accelerate the progress of poverty alleviation and reduce inequality more effectively returns to the focus of national and global development agendas. This calls for newly revitalized research to take to the field and capture the experiences from emerging economics and learning from the researchers of the Global South.

Against this backdrop, *The End of Poverty* offers timely valuable insights from deep-rooted practices in China by bridging the knowledge gap between philosophical reflections on the nature of the poor and practical exploration of grassroots-based poverty reduction. The author completes the work by thinking big about strategies against poverty at the global, regional and national levels, tracing the root causes of the poor in history, and thinking/doing small in remote, poor ethnic villages in the southwest of China and beyond.

¹This review is one of the outputs of the research project titled 'Research on the approaches and mechanism for effective sharing of poverty reduction experiences among China and Belt and Road countries' supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (No. 21&ZD180).

2. A way to read the book: understand the author's aspiration

As the author highlights, 'how a social scientist raises a question and how to answer it is highly influenced by his or her own experiences'. An introduction about Prof. Li is pertinent. This will help us to identify an effective way to understand this book containing his reflections on personal and professional experiences as well as anecdotes gained from a long and intense period of working with the poor in villages.

Li was born in the early 1960s in the northwest of China, one of the poorest regions in the country. His childhood in a poverty-stricken hometown had an essential impact on his personality and future career by making him emotionally directed toward the poor, even though his family was relatively better off. After his graduation in the 1980s as a talented agronomist, he had the opportunity to join a high-level think tank working on the Central Committee of China's strategies for rural development during 1987–1989. This endowed him with a bird's-eye view of China's rural development and poverty reduction policies at the national level. Meanwhile, these experiences also built up his awareness of the importance of learning from the field, particularly from the grassroots-level farmers.

At the end of the 1980s, he was invited to work at China Agricultural University (CAU), and started his career in development studies and fostering of talent. He went to Netherlands and Germany to study cutting-edge participatory development theories and practices. Under the context of China's Open Door Policy, he introduced the area of development studies into China and became the founding dean of the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) at CAU. During his tenure, he established the program's basic architecture based in the Chinese experience but infused with a global perspective on mechanisms for the generation and dissemination of development knowledge, particularly on rural development and poverty reduction. He resigned from the post of COHD dean in 2015.

He soon registered a non-governmental organization (NGO) in a remote ethnic county and started to work with local government and farmers to explore a pathway for local farmers to escape the deep poverty trap. This practice won him not only local people's respect for its effective impact in the field but also the top national award for poverty alleviation. Meanwhile, these efforts were echoed by another development cooperation project in Tanzania piloted by him and his team since 2011, through which he works closely with the Tanzanian government, university and community farmers to improve local maize productivity and enhance local people's nutrition through intercropping of maize and beans, as well as to improve local public management capacities through working together.

Based on all these experiences, Prof. Li pursues his academic work following three aspirations. Firstly, he strongly believes in action research and learning from the field to understand farmers' challenges and opportunities. Secondly, he insists that researchers from the Global South need to understand local cultural and national situations, policies and practices to develop independent knowledge, alongside deeply understanding the Western modern development theories and methodology. Thirdly, he attaches importance to comparative studies, which give researchers a global perspective and a broad mindset.

3. Book content and insight

The book is not a dry review of the recent literature, but a collection of essays and opinion pieces. It is an 'espresso' of Li's insights into and inquiries about China's chronic and transitional poverty, based on his investigation of the nature of poverty and practices of poverty reduction in different countries. The book consists of six chapters on 'The roots of the poverty'; 'Is it necessary to help the poor?'; 'Is poverty reduction for common prosperity?';

'What is the challenge for poverty reduction?'; 'Why does China pursue a nationwide battle to reduce extreme poverty?'; and, lastly, 'On the ground: a village story of change'. The first two chapters examine the concepts and nature of poverty via different schools of thought. Departing from this intellectual landscape, the middle three chapters discuss policies and practices of poverty reduction in China and other countries. The last chapter zooms in on stories of the Hebian Village experiment in China where Prof. Li deeply engaged with local government and farmers for six years. It seems hard to identify a strong link through the various chapters, yet we can see clearly the above-mentioned three aspirations of the author running through the whole book.

Firstly, engaged scholarship matters to link theory to reality. On-the-ground action research provides a nuanced view. Readers of the book will be deeply impressed by its rich narratives about poverty from the poor themselves, as well as the collaborative relationships and shared activities among farmers, local government and NGOs in the poverty reduction process. It is critical to translate the abstract concepts and theories into real contexts and specific difficulties, contributing to a public understanding of the poor's situation and helplessness.

In the book, the case of Hebian Village runs through several chapters. By drawing on practical stories from the village, Prof. Li debates concepts such as laziness, language, education, illness, living expenses, housing, food, nutrition, the gender dilemma and the interplay of these concepts with poverty, which allows us to hear voices of the poor and understand their real situation. Through practice, the author provides an explanation of the causes of poverty and reminds us of the constraints the poor grapple with, the challenges they meet and the choices they face. The mutually strengthened difficulties are building up an invisible 'poverty trap' for the poor, which is hard to escape. Similar concepts have been discussed by other scholars, such as Jeffery Sachs (reviewed by Easterly 2006) and Banerjee and Duflo (2007), but the Hebian case deepens the public understanding of those concepts through real life stories on the ground.

The case is based on Prof. Li's academic life and the six years he spent on the ground, which differentiates the book from others in terms of its research methodology. In Hebian Village, the author attempted to turn the poverty reduction field into a process of seeking modernity together with the villagers. After trust building and problem diagnosis, Prof. Li established an NGO, which worked with farmers to beautify their surroundings by collecting rubbish and growing flowers along the road. Toilets were renovated; modern elements were injected through the construction of Yao minority mothers' guest rooms in each household and by opening windows in the wall to introduce light into their living rooms. A common conference room and a modern pub were built at the village center. Local farmers were also facilitated to set up a cooperative to meet the market demands for the new business activities and manage local collective assets more effectively. Throughout the process, local farmers were able to 'feel' and 'understand' 'modernity' specifically in their daily lives, and learn how to gradually access it. Meanwhile, Prof. Li achieved a personal transformation from a scholar (creator of theory) to an initiator of poverty reduction projects, an explorer of poverty alleviation methods, a coordinator among multiple stakeholders and even a stakeholder of poverty alleviation achievements. This book interprets the process of a scholar working together with multiple stakeholders to form a joint force for poverty reduction. It also demonstrates the process of how theory relates to reality.

Secondly, pro-poor institutional building and policy intervention matter in developing countries. In the book, the author clearly argues the need for pro-poor institutional building and adaptive governance structures in developing countries. Poor people are stuck in a low-level equilibrium, and an external boost will be needed to get them out of it. Is it necessary to reduce poverty? Yes. It is an invisible social contract among human groups. The invention of

poverty reduction essentially provides a counter-balance mechanism to the social, economic and political generation of inequality and poverty upon the natural evolution of individual biological differences, particularly based on the private regime.

The book starts with three schools of thoughts on the roots of poverty: individual traits or capabilities, a culture of poverty, or a structural institutional arrangement. By critically reviewing the first two sets of arguments and the corresponding practices in American and European countries, Prof. Li strongly disagrees regarding individual causes of poverty in the Global South, and reminds us of the limitations of post-colonial knowledge systems, particularly in terms of cultural studies in developing countries. He argues that individual and cultural factors are of secondary importance in the Global South, while a lack of proper policy interventions and institutional arrangements are deeply structural and key obstacles preventing the poor from benefiting from the development process. He argues that getting a poor person out of poverty is not technically difficult; what is difficult is to adjust the political and social mechanisms that continue to produce poverty. Those institutions include public services such as education, public health, banking, transportation, insurance, employment, taxation, and even NGO management style at both country and global levels.

Yet the pro-poor institutional building and policy interventions aim to go beyond the conventional big bush and grand schemes proposed by development economists in the 1950s–1960s and later by Jeffery Sachs in the 1980s. It also requires integrating Banerjee and Duflo's proposal for only small interventions right now to marginally improve the health, schooling and incomes of the poor. 'The poor will still be poor, but they can be made better-off. It follows that, by studying the poor, we can equip ourselves, in small steps, to more effectively and intelligently help them, if not radically transform their lives'. In this vein, China provides a unique case to show how linking grand strategy to small interventions in different periods by different stakeholders is a viable strategy in poverty reduction. China's national poverty strategies and policies started with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and intensified to include targeted poverty reduction strategies particularly since the mid-1980s, with the focus narrowing to deep structural poverty since 2013. The target of the poor has been gradually narrowed from the national level to regional and county levels and to villages and households. Aside from the national strategy, Prof. Li also elaborated what he as an intellectually led NGO initiator started with a poverty reduction experiment, playing a supplementary role in the big bush process.

Prof. Li highlights the significance of an adaptive policy system and practical models that are suitable for the local context and centered on farmers. For instance, in Hebian, he introduced a method to generate cash flow through the development of new businesses such as Yao mothers' guest rooms and a conference room to gradually support farmers and build their confidence in moving out of the poverty trap and finding ways to continuously cultivate their capacities of self-reliance development. He also facilitated a method to transform a public conference and pub revenue into village collective assets by establishing the Hebian Village Cooperative. This guides the government public investment more effectively to support the local community, thus forming a win-win-win-win system for government, NGOs, farmers and the market. The book contains many such methods for exploring innovative pathways to maintain momentum for the poor to take action for self-led development. The set of stories as a whole demonstrates how the poor in the Global South, lacking adequate resources, can still make differences by breaking some bottlenecks and making gradual progress based upon the existing advantages, and gradually build up confidence for endogenous development.

Thirdly, comparative studies and broad horizons matter for poverty reduction. This theme is not overtly visible in the book, yet it runs strongly through the whole text. In the book, we

can find many examples of the poor and poverty reduction-related policies and actions in different countries, including China, Tanzania, Malawi, the USA, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and other European countries. This relates to the author's broad work experiences and global perspective on development.

As a trained agronomist, Li's primary belief is science-oriented. He repeatedly emphasizes that he is a developmentalist – or an organic developmentalist, to avoid the traditional stereotype of the developmentalist. He believes in the necessity of pursuing modernity and modernization in the poverty reduction process despite the rich critiques of modernization by some social scientists. This is also why he strongly criticizes the the post-colonial knowledge system, which he believes is misleading in its limitations on building the poor's action capacity by focusing too much on the past and cultural reflection, and loses its own subjectivity to pursue modernity. He, on the contrary, continues to demonstrate the modern lifestyle and mindset in Hebian Village, and using 'learning by doing' to explore probably non-systematic but pragmatic innovative pathways for the poor to escape the poverty trap and master their own destiny. Scaling this case up to national and global levels, Prof. Li reminds intellectuals and policymakers in the Global South of the necessity to critically review the current dominant development knowledge and develop a real independent conception about development on the one side, while also avoiding nationalism and populism on the other.

4. Limitations and recommendations

The book is written in an accessible style and its cases are empirically rich. If there is a weakness of the book, on its own terms, it is that this book is not a systematic academic work, but a collection of practical reflections and opinion papers. There are also three puzzles worthy of further inquiry. Firstly, how are pro-poor institutional arrangements and policy interventions initiated and operated? How can development priorities be incrementally set by integrating mandatory institutional change and induced institutional change? Secondly, what are the win-win-win-win mechanisms developed among the government, NGO, farmers and market in Hebian Village for the poor? How can we sensitively respond to the demands of key stakeholders, and keep balancing the power and benefits among them to build a common development community? Thirdly, how should we cultivate the self-reliance awareness and capacity of poor farmers? What are the different roles of stakeholders in the cultivation process? All these questions require further investigation from engaged scholarship.

Despite these limitations, ultimately *The End of Poverty* does a masterful job of illuminating, using both research findings and personal experiences, how complex and challenging the lives of the poor are. The book may interest not only a small circle of poverty researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, but also a wider spectrum of readers who want to understand real development and agrarian change in China and beyond. Furthermore, the book is written in Chinese and hopefully it can be translated into many other languages to increase its accessibility.

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