

The Culture of Poverty Alleviation

- A New Examination and Reflection on Poverty Relief and Development from the Culture of Poverty Viewpoint

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Abstract: In order to drive progress toward the completion of building a comprehensively well-off society, poverty reduction has become a top priority on the agendas of poverty stricken areas. Paths that can help advance and improve poverty reduction are diverse, and the culture of poverty alleviation is a choice in this context. From the perspective of the culture of poverty, this paper attempts to probe the poverty situation in poverty stricken areas and identify the factors that contribute to the condition such as antiquated ideas and mindsets, limited schooling, and negative values of the people inhabiting these areas, which hinder them from casting off poverty. Therefore, in carrying out the work of poverty alleviation, we must bear in mind several important aspects like system building, transformation of people's mindsets, development of a culture of industry and the effective supply of educational resources. We must examine and reflect on the work rationally. Only then will the effort contribute to realizing the ultimate goal of overall poverty reduction.

Keywords: the culture of poverty alleviation; poverty stricken areas; poverty culture; poverty reduction

The phenomenon of poverty in poverty stricken areas appears to be an economic problem, but when put under scrutiny, it is actually a cultural one. At present, researches done from the perspective of the culture of poverty note that having lived in poverty for a long time, poverty stricken people have gradually developed among them a solidified cultural system that allows poverty to persist and furthermore, if such a system is to be established, its inherent, perennial habits, customs, mindsets, attitudes and values must be deconstructed

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and reconstructed, thereby creating conditions for the change from the present substantial amounts of poverty to less and less substantial amounts by transforming the economic structure of poverty stricken areas. Within the theoretical framework of the culture of poverty, this paper reflects on the culture of poverty alleviation in poverty stricken areas with the purpose of outlining the genealogy of effective approaches to poverty reduction.

1. Value and Significance of the Culture of Poverty Alleviation

The eminent American scholar Samuel P. Huntington once remarked, "The more mankind declares war on its ancient enemies, poverty and ignorance, the more it brings war onto itself."^[1] Therefore, to rid ourselves of the culture of poverty is of particular importance. Generally speaking, two barriers are sustaining poverty in these poverty stricken areas: Inaccessibility and cultural backwardness. Once a region's culture is mired in backwardness, it lacks the potential to develop a viable economy resulting in persistent poverty.

An important and increasingly popular topic in recent years, the culture of poverty alleviation is designed to raise the humanistic literacy and overall quality of life for the population of poverty stricken areas by fostering modern concepts. In this theory, to "help people" is the main means, and the ultimate goal is to lift the people's quality of life out of poverty.

As regards Dingxi City of Gansu Province, a poverty stricken area of the national level, the annual per capita disposable income of urban residents in 2014 was 17,217 *yuan*, and the rural per capita net income for the same year was 4,600 *yuan*^[2] (author: the national figure was 8,500 *yuan*). This economic situation seriously restricts the quality of life for locals. Concerning the

supply of basic public cultural products, Dingxi is home to six art performance troupes. There are eight cultural centers, eight public libraries, eight museums, and eight archives. Its cable TV subscribers amount to 97 thousand households, the municipality wide population coverage of broadcasting programs stands at 95.79% (nationwide being 98.0%), and the municipality wide population coverage of television programs is 96.75% (nationwide being 98.6%).^[3] By contrast, Hangzhou, located in the relatively developed coastal province of Zhejiang, is home to 21 art performance troupes, 15 cultural centers, and 15 public libraries with a total collection of 17 million books, from which over 8 million citizens can borrow books free of charge. Also, Hangzhou has established 427 grassroots public electronic reading rooms in streets (townships), communities (villages), and 2,166 book circulation points.^[4] Through a comparison of the two cities, we can see that for the over 3 plus million people of Dingxi, the supply of basic public cultural products is inadequate, which adversely affects the culture of poverty alleviation.

Culture can make a huge contribution to economic development. Productivity varies among people with different levels of education. An assessment report by UNESCO concluded that people with an elementary level of education see their labor productivity increase by 43% and people with a high level of education can experience a 300% increase. In terms of mode of production, handicraftsmen generally have a per capita production value of 1,000 *yuan*, workers in traditional industries a per capita output value of 10,000 *yuan*, and workers in high tech industries 100,000 *yuan*. Because of this, the culture of poverty alleviation is proposed, focusing on education as the best way to maximize the output of wealth and lift poor areas out of poverty.

Compared to traditional poverty reduction approaches such as poverty alleviation through funding support or preferential policies,^[5] the culture of poverty alleviation is a new approach to poverty reduction. The basic principle of the culture of poverty alleviation is to provide positive changes in culture and the availability of services to increase productivity and regional economic development. As society progresses and ideology plays a lesser role, culture further integrates with economy and new cultural norms that encourage development can develop. The culture has gone beyond its initial function of meeting people's entertainment needs, and now provides economic development with intellectual impetus and support, a role far greater than intended for it.

Since 1986 when China began to advance its effort to reduce poverty through development on a large scale in a planned and organized way, the culture of poverty alleviation has always been attached great importance to by the national and local governments. In 1992, the Frontier Culture Corridor program initiated by the Ministry of Culture launched a number of culture projects and the culture of poverty alleviation efforts. In December, 1993, in view of the great importance of this work, the Ministry of Culture set up a Commission on Poverty Culture Alleviation, dedicated to directing work on the culture of poverty alleviation in poverty stricken areas. After that, the culture of poverty alleviation work was project based, and a number of well targeted, systematic programs resulted, including Project Hope, the Spring Bud Program, and the Culture to the Countryside Program. In 2008, the China Association of Poverty Alleviation and Development officially launched the culture of poverty alleviation program, which marked the beginning of a more systematic effort in this field equipped with a global view and modern concepts.

It is within this context that the ten culture of poverty alleviation projects were launched.

2. A Theoretical Paradigm of the Culture of Poverty Alleviation

China's domestic academia generally ascribes poverty to underdeveloped infrastructure, weak economic basis, and limited resource conditions. Some economists suggest that the allocation of land, capital and other factors of production in poverty stricken areas is ineffectual or uneven, which gives rise to poverty. Some other scholars put forward the view of systemic poverty arguing that poverty does not result from individual factors like natural environment, capital, technology or talent, but is determined by a network of various relevant factors. They call this interconnected poverty formation mechanism an elective affinity. In this academic framework, the culture of poverty theory offers a new perspective for poverty alleviation and economic development in poor areas from the standpoint of cultural anthropology.

2.1 Academic Implications of the Culture of Poverty Theory

The culture functionalist Malinowski held that, "Culture contains a set of instruments and customs, or the physical or psychological habits, that directly or indirectly meet human needs."^[6] Deng Xiaoping presented from the perspective of national strategy that, "A country's strength and economic development potential depends on the quality of its labor force and the quantity and quality of its intellectuals. Only when China's education is adequate will the billion people country be able to give full play to its huge advantage in talent resources. With such an advantage and the socialism system, our goals are attainable."^[7] The culture of poverty alleviation

in poor areas is aimed at raising the level of human intelligence and shaping modern civic consciousness.

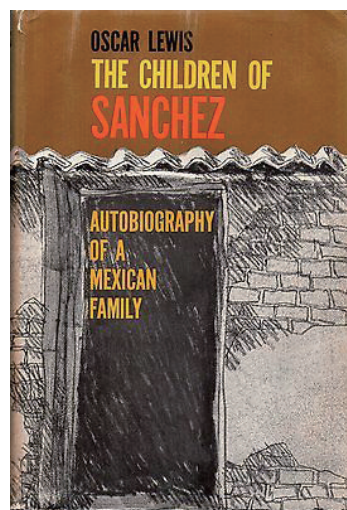
For a long time, lots of discussions on the culture of poverty alleviation have been going on in the community of theorists. For instance, some scholars believe that the purpose of the culture of poverty alleviation is to enhance the cultural literacy of local inhabitants, and some others think that the alleviation is to develop regional cultural industries based on local cultural resources. In recent years, however, most scholars contend that the root cause of poverty in poor areas is the culture. The so called culture of poverty means that because they have lived in poverty for such a long period, the inhabitants in poor areas gradually develop a solidified set of values, life style, and behavior modes which are manifested in low self-esteem, helplessness, insecurity, absence of an enterprising mind, clinging to old ways of life, and a narrow view. Since China has a vast territory, historical and cultural traditions vary from region to region. Thus the culture of poverty varies in different poor areas. But in essence, these areas all share such characteristics as backward values and a negative philosophy of life.

At present, the following four representative views on the culture of poverty theory exist within China's academic circles: The culture of poverty is a subculture which refers to the group of people whose average living standards are stuck in poverty, and that gradually form a solidified culture system allowing poverty to persist.^[8] Poverty is a way of life for the poor, mainly composed of the habits, customs, mentality, values and other non-material forms among this class of people.^[9] Poverty is rooted in an impoverished economy and also contributes to the economics of poverty. The impoverished economy is closely intertwined with the poverty culture, and the two

interact as both cause and effect.^[10] Poverty is a subculture different from the mainstream culture. The material and non-material forms of poverty restrain each other and can transform into each other under certain circumstances.^[11] The above mentioned theories on poverty culture expound on the root causes of poverty from different perspectives, and are enlightening the culture of poverty alleviation.

2.2 Academic Review of the Culture of Poverty Theory

The culture of poverty theory is a theoretical paradigm that explains the phenomenon of poverty from the perspective of social and cultural studies. It debuted in the 1959 book *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* by American anthropologist Oscar Lewis, a book based on case studies of poverty stricken families and communities. During his research, Lewis called the passive and negative attitude towards an impoverished life of those marginalized in the social power structure and suffering from poverty pressure the culture of poverty, believing that this subculture produces negative social and mental



The Children of Sanchez
by Oscar Lewis.

impacts on its members and the community. Suffering from poverty, people living in an impoverished community rarely taste love, joy or satisfaction. Under the pressure of hunger, their spirits are afflicted with malaise, alcoholism is rampant, sexual behavior is promiscuous, and the expected gentleness and humility while interacting with the outside world is missing. Oscar Lewis concluded that, "this culture of poverty featuring this morbid value and belief system is developed in the poverty stricken class' s social life, which causes them to expect no economic prosperity for themselves or moving to an upper social stratum. In the long run, this subculture developed by them, contrary to the mainstream society, begins to solidify, and gradually becomes a way of life."^[12] It is a way of life that sustains their poverty.

In 1961, Oscar Lewis further elaborated on the culture of poverty in his book, *Children of Sanchez*, "For those thinking poverty means no culture, the culture of poverty seems to be a self-contradictory phrase. This also seems to confer on poverty some kind of pride and prominence. This is not my original intention. In cultural anthropology, culture is actually a life structure that can be passed on from one generation to another. In using culture to understand poverty, I intend to direct people' s attention to show that poverty in modern countries is not only an economically disorganized state, but signifies some positive ingredients. Poverty has a certain kind of structure, some kind of justification, and even a certain defense mechanism that permits the poor to survive. In short, it is a way of life that is quite stable and perennial, and passes along the family' s ancestral line. For family members, the culture of poverty has its own patterns and significant social and psychological consequences. It is the agent that affects its integration to national culture of a higher level, and a subculture in and of

itself."^[13]

In recent years, when American academia reexamined the culture of poverty, the scholars believed that the disastrous attitudes and behaviors of poverty subjects are not the product of solidified morals, but results from racial segregation and social isolation. Robert J. Sampson, the sociologist of Harvard University proposed while studying the structure of poverty, "That a community cannot escape the poverty trap has something to do with the common knowledge of people' s thought and actions." Through the examination of graffiti, garbage piling and mailing miscarriage in poor neighborhoods, he concluded, "The level of income cannot fully account for economic inequality, while a community' s cultural norms, values, ethics and degree of disorder are more explanatory in assessing the level of poverty in reality."^[14] Thus, the deep-seated trigger of economic poverty ought to be a culture of poverty.

2.3 Poverty Manifestations from the Culture of Poverty Perspective

Anti-poverty theorists including Karl Gunnar Myrdal, Nobel laureate in economics said, "Poverty is associated with people' s fatalism, and their numbness and indifference to changing notions and systems, learning modern technologies, and improving sanitary conditions."^[15] As a result, from the perspective of the culture of poverty, we find that poverty manifestations are somewhat consistent among different poverty stricken areas.

(1) Behind times Ideas

In poverty stricken areas, until adequate food and clothing is secured, people have no time for considering whether the dietary structure is reasonable, not to mention preservation of health and high level spiritual needs. Influenced by long standing tradition, many archaic concepts remain entrenched in poverty stricken areas. For

example, not having a male heir is the most severe act against filial piety, and boys are preferred over girls. With excessive fertility comes an expanded family size and increased consumption expenditures. Thus the working age family members have to assume a greater workload. Their spiritual burden is also increased and consequently the energy devoted to production decreases. Meanwhile, because China's economic modernization was launched at a relatively later time, its productivity falls far behind that of developed countries in Europe and North America. In addition to that, still afflicted by the smallholder ideology, Chinese people rarely give consideration to economic costs and opportunity costs during production, but rather continue to follow the original production mode and life style. As a result, a vicious cycle has become the norm: the more they farm the land, the poorer they become; the poorer they become, the more backward their thinking is; the more backward their thinking is, the more fearful they are of risks and challenges and in the end they have no choice but to farm. This type of backward thinking leads directly to poverty.

(2) Low Levels of Education

In this era of social transformation, owing to various pronounced social conflicts, the fine tradition of advocating education and respecting the virtuous has gradually faded away in the Chinese rural population. The idea of the uselessness of study is prevalent in rural areas, especially in poor areas, forcing modern science and technology, which could provide aid to agricultural production, out of these poor areas. Despite the mandatory nine-year compulsory education enforced by the state, dropout rates of children in poor areas are still high for various reasons. Even when the nine-year education is completed, what they have learned is only the most

rudimentary knowledge. Questions as to whether the modern scientific knowledge and ideas have armed their minds, whether they have obtained the knowledge and skills to free themselves of poverty, whether they are determined and confident enough to get ahead to change their fate, are completely unknown to us, and the quality of education in poverty stricken areas is another doubt overhanging. To get completely out of poverty, it is highly necessary to effectively prevent the intergenerational transmission of the culture of poverty and deconstruct the poverty duplicating function of this subculture.

(3) Negative Values

Due to the impact of the culture of poverty, negative values are prevailing in poverty stricken areas, the main indications being a fatalistic outlook on life, the muddling along concept of happiness, the smallholder based production concept, the labor concept featuring indolence, the moral outlook valuing loyalty over morality, the consumption view that contents itself with a subsistence level, the home town concept that discourages migration or relocation, and the fertility view that greater happiness comes with more children. These negative values are rife in the life of poor societies and gradually dissolve the rural population's spiritual ideas of work dedication, entrepreneurship and thrift practicing. As Daniel Bell put it, "With the emerging of the consumer society, it attaches particular importance to consumption and possession of materials, and constantly destroys the thrifty, economical, and self restraining traditional value system that condemns whimsy."^[16] Due to the strong presence of the culture of poverty, coupled with the debut of the consumer culture, the values of people in the impoverished regions will become even more negative.

3. Rational Thinking on the Selection of the Culture of Poverty Alleviation Path in Poverty Stricken Areas

American scholar D. P. Moynihan has studied the model of poverty's vicious cycle.^[17] His main views include: As people in poor areas have long lived in, and been influenced by the culture of poverty, they lack the impetus to move upward. The lack of educational resources leads to low levels of education and fewer opportunities, which give people living in these areas no competitive edge, and mean that they can only fill the low paid jobs. Lower revenue and lower social status further exacerbate impoverishment, creating a vicious cycle.

The goal of the culture of poverty alleviation is to break this vicious cycle by reforming the culture of poverty and changing people's negative thoughts and views so that positive cultural power can in turn drive local economic development, thus lifting the poverty stricken area out of poverty. Generally speaking, the culture of poverty alleviation should cover two aspects. The leading force in poverty alleviation, mainly government's functional departments should be joined by other parties, a policy framework should be established, private capital absorbed, and related talents introduced to supply solid material and institutional guarantees for poverty stricken areas. Concerning the residents of impoverished areas advancements in cultural ideals and the introduction of advanced technologies can be introduced, which will cultivate optimistic beliefs and positive morals in farmers by training them in the ways of modern farming. Hence the autogenesis process is completed, and their poverty is fundamentally cast off.

In order to contribute to the culture of poverty alleviation in poor areas, we must design and carry out rational solutions.

3.1 Strengthening System Design, Establish the Four Level (county, township, village, and village group) Culture Organizations in a Planned and Orderly Manner, and Effectively Assess on Site Culture Organizations at all Levels.

The culture houses, libraries, museums, cultural stations, art galleries and cultural centers all fall under the category of public welfare institutions, which means that the government must not trust the market with the life of these institutions, but should rather fund their basic expenditures.

In Dingxi of Gansu Province, the source of the Weihe River, the government has in recent years pushed forward the completion of building 105 townships integrated culture stations, and also the Rural Library Program has covered all villages. The "Three Centers and One Station", referring to cultural centers, libraries, museums, and cultural stations, in the city and its counties (districts) have by now all been open to the public for free, and have obtained an annual subsidy of over 8 million *yuan* from the state finance. At the same time the "all village accessibility program" for television broadcasting has covered 109,000



the Rural Library Program has covered all villages

households, the "all household coverage program" has covered 390,000 households, and a total of 100 film projection teams for rural areas have been set up, with the film projection in rural areas being fully digitalized. Since September 2015 the city has built 385 "Village Stages" and 17 up to standard township integrated cultural stations, as well as mobilized some 198 million *yuan* of private funding to establish 496 countryside drama stages. Lintao County of Gansu Province, the place that Majiayao culture is named after, has cumulatively invested 14.953 million *yuan* in the program of the culture information resources sharing, the free opening of "Three Centers and One Station" and other culture welfare projects, as well as in building 17 township integrated culture centers and 324 rural libraries, thereby making the public cultural service system cover both urban and rural areas. Additionally, in recent years, with the support of the local government, there has been arranged approximately 70 large scale art performances, 36 calligraphy and painting exhibitions, and over 2,800 performance activities were staged in the countryside, including traditional Chinese drama.^[18] As of now, the county has invested over 81 million *yuan* in constructing the culture facilities, and in 2015 alone, it invested 650 thousand *yuan*, and mobilized social capital investment amounting to over 8 million *yuan*. It has constructed 168 "Village Stages", formed 347 art groups, and discovered and cultivated over 3,400 persons leading the art cause, involving some 300 thousand people viewing and attending the county's art performances.^[19] In impoverished areas, the local government plays an active role in boosting the cultural development, which is conducive not only to the construction of the culture of poverty alleviation platform, but also to the creation of rural cultural life environment and the fostering of a longing in rural people for

beauty and happiness.

While making sure the cultural infrastructure development is adequately funded and advanced, departments involved should, based on the characteristics of their business and social needs, consider the option of providing paid services, thus conveying better cultural products to more people through the market mechanism. To develop the culture industries and promote the culture tourism for example, the government will not only gain immediate economic benefits, but also provide a supporting environment in which the locals' modern citizenship awareness can be fostered.

3.2 Build Correct Modern Values. It is universally accepted that the poverty problem in poor areas can be attributed to limited education levels, backward thinking and the absence of development consciousness. Therefore, to alleviate the culture of poverty is not only to rid the impoverished of the backward thinking, but also impart to them new thoughts and new concepts, substituting original outmoded ones with modern values.^[20]

Of course, modern values have a number of elements, the basic ones including industry, honesty, innovativeness, progressiveness, and practicality. The former three are all fine traditional virtues revered by the Chinese nation, and summarize in succinctness the traditional Chinese spirit. Innovativeness and progressiveness are what is required by development against the background of global modernization, highlighting the spirit of the era, and it is the best choice to crack the riddle of "industry not leading to prosperity" in poverty stricken areas.

Therefore, only by respecting the values of the new era, industry, honesty, innovativeness, progressiveness, and practicality, will the people be guided to establish a correct worldview,

outlook on life and values; will the people be able to gather strength and become determined and confident through establishing lofty ideas; will the people stimulate their potentials while doing their work. Moreover, the locals will be led by the transformation into a positive, healthy value dimension in their thoughts and spiritual quality, and the modern civilization awareness and the culture spirit in them will be cultivated. This awareness should become a quality ingrained in people's minds, and play a role in achieving leapfrog development and completing the building of a moderately prosperous society.

3.3 Make full use of local cultural resource reserves, collect, sort and mine folk music, dance and other non-material culture, develop cultural and natural landscape tourism resources, develop a culture economy chain with regional characteristics, and promote the historical and cultural resources of poverty stricken areas to the outside world, thus helping the development of local culture industries.

Cultural industries are a new type of industry that develops the ideas and talent originating from individuals and protected as intellectual property rights into products which create new wealth, enhance public aesthetic qualities and improve the living environment. From the perspective of current social ecology, as the economic development of poverty stricken areas lag behind, these areas are left in their underdeveloped state, therefore, the cultural types there are preserved in their original forms, giving the areas an edge in developing cultural industries and playing a decisive role in the culture of poverty reduction. Take the poverty stricken Dingxi City in central Gansu as an example. Altogether 7 intangible culture heritage categories of Dingxi have made it to the national level, 34 provincial level and

231 municipal level intangible cultural heritage protection list. According to statistics, the city wide intangible cultural heritage can be roughly divided into ten major categories, namely oral folk literature, traditional painting, traditional music, folk dance, traditional opera, folk handicraft, traditional medicine, traditional sports, entertainment and acrobatics, and traditional mountain farm folk customs that encompass over 2,000 subcategories.^[21] Such rich folk culture resources can be exploited in developing local cultural industries.

3.4 Increase educational provisions, and cut off the chain of poverty culture replication

John Meyer stated, "Education plays a significant role in provoking changes to farmers' thinking, because it cannot only expand the horizons of farmers themselves and their children, but also trigger changes in their consumption concept, production methods and lifestyle. More importantly, it provides farmers and their future with the means to reform, thereby arousing them to proactively seek change."^[22] Therefore, education is the most effective means to deconstruct the parent body of the culture of poverty.

In improving the average education levels of farmers in poor areas, what is the most important is to increase input of scientific and technological resources. Thus, they will be trained and equipped with a mind for market, adopting contract farming, monetizing products through market, capitalizing currencies, and even turning capital into wealth. Their mental structure will also be reshaped to eliminate the psychological restraints created by a culture of poverty. They will gradually adopt the modern values in the reconstruction of local culture, and thus devote themselves to the anti-poverty fight with a healthy attitude. Meanwhile, what's more critical is to transform the carriers of

the culture of poverty transmission, by improving the values, knowledge structure, and labor skills of the offspring of the disadvantaged groups, and cast off poverty completely.

In summary, from the perspective of social and cultural studies, only when the cultural and spiritual levels of people are raised will poverty be completely shaken off and backwardness be

eradicated. Therefore, while selecting a path for the culture of poverty alleviation in poverty stricken areas, we must take into consideration the local physiographic features to rationally design and reflect on the path, so that it will help advance the overall poverty alleviation work and deliver success.

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