

Research on anti-poverty efforts in China's ethnic minority areas since the 1970s



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Abstract

Poverty remains a significant global challenge, despite ongoing efforts throughout history to address it. China's fight against poverty, as part of global poverty governance efforts, has yielded valuable insights and examples for anti-poverty strategies, propelling changes within the global poverty governance system. This paper conducts a review of post-1978 anti-poverty research covering China's ethnic minority regions, roughly dividing the research history into three distinct phases: 1978–2012, 2013–2020, and post-2020. The research findings at each stage are summarized in terms of research topics, perspectives, and paradigms. Based on these findings, the paper provides a forward-looking outlook on future research into anti-poverty efforts in China's ethnic minority regions.

Keywords Anti-poverty · Ethnic minority areas in China · Research history · Future outlook

Introduction

Throughout the course of human civilization, poverty has been a consistent socio-economic phenomenon manifesting in various social forms. As such, poverty reduction has become a major concern and topic of research across the world. *The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* has set its primary goal as eradicating poverty in all its forms, aiming to eliminate extreme poverty for all people

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everywhere by 2030. In countries around the world, addressing poverty among minority groups stands out as the top priority of poverty governance and is a matter of significant government concern. In the United States, poverty is often regarded as disproportionately affecting non-white populations. Among the 75 million impoverished people in Brazil, the majority comprises Afro-Indians, Indians, and pure black people. In Australia, which has been described by sociologists as “an ethnic mosaic,” the indigenous communities constitute a significant portion of the socially disadvantaged population. While these groups differ broadly from China’s ethnic minorities in terms of their histories, social statuses, and political empowerment, they share certain similarities in terms of their living environments, social resource allocation, and socioeconomic status. They have all suffered, or are suffering from severe poverty.

In 1989, Xi Jinping emphasized in his speech that genuine equality can only be achieved once all individuals enjoy an equal level of economic and cultural development. As such, national efforts to eradicate poverty have begun to shift towards minority areas (Xi 1992). From the contiguous areas of extreme poverty that were designated in 2011 by the Chinese government, to the 420 National-level impoverished counties that were removed from the poverty list in 2020, such ethnic minority areas, where extreme poverty¹ was concentrated, have been a cornerstone of the poverty alleviation and development program. According to “*The Outline for Development-oriented Poverty Reduction in China’s Rural Areas (2011–2020)*”, the Chinese government has designated 14 contiguous areas of extreme poverty throughout the country, of which 11 are ethnic minority areas. In 2015, *The Decision on Resolutely Winning the Battle Against Poverty (2015)* was released. Consequently, the central government of China escalated its investment in poverty alleviation within ethnic minority areas, aiming to bridge the development gap with non-ethnic minority areas by accelerating poverty reduction in the minority areas. This approach aimed to aid ethnic minority areas in escaping poverty as scheduled, thereby joining other areas in achieving moderate prosperity towards common prosperity.² From 2016 to 2020, the per capita income of the poor population of China’s ethnic minority areas saw an increase of 156% from 4,239 yuan to 10,770 yuan. This reflects the

¹ The concept of “extreme poverty” involves two dimensions: policy level and academic level. The concept of “extreme poverty” in this article mainly refers to a policy expression, which appears in Chinese government documents, leaders’ speeches, and government department work reports. It initially originated from the regional units that were determined as priority for poverty alleviation work based on a comparison of the economic and social conditions across the country. On November 21, 2017, the Chinese government issued *The Implementation Opinions on Supporting Poverty Alleviation in Extreme Poverty Areas*, which clearly defined the concrete category of extreme poverty areas, including “Three Regions and Three Prefectures” and Poverty-stricken counties with a poverty ratio exceeding 18% and poverty-stricken villages with a poverty ratio exceeding 20%.

² “Moderate prosperity” is a unique concept in China. It refers to “further improvement in the quality of life with sufficient food and clothing on the basis of meeting the basic needs”. Chinese scholar Chen Youhua pointed out that moderate prosperity is a concept used by the Chinese people to measure the quality of life, describing a state of life with a living standard between basic and affluent (Chen 2004). “Common prosperity” is an important feature of Chinese-style modernization and an essential requirement of socialism. It is the prosperity for all the people, in both material and spiritual life.

successful lifting of 31.21 million people out of poverty based on current standards, effectively eliminating both absolute poverty and overall regional poverty and realizing universal moderate prosperity.

The matter of poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas not only presents a major practical challenge for the entire Chinese population but also represents an important theoretical subject within academic circles in China. Over various historical periods, Chinese scholars have developed nuanced understandings of poverty in China's ethnic minority areas, conducting extensive analyses and producing different interpretations of the root causes of poverty and the anti-poverty strategies that could alleviate it, leading to fruitful research outcomes. This paper reviews and consolidates the anti-poverty research on China's ethnic minority areas conducted by Chinese academic circles since the implementation of China's reform and opening-up policy in 1978. Further, it offers a perspective on future research into the issue of poverty reduction in China's ethnic minority areas.

Methodology

This paper conducts a comprehensive literature review and analysis of anti-poverty research on China's ethnic minority areas conducted by Chinese academic circles since the 1970s. Specifically, this paper divides the research into three chronological phases: 1978–2012, 2013–2020, and post-2020, and summarizes the research results at each stage, examining the research topic, perspectives, and paradigms. On this basis, the paper identifies gaps and shortcomings in the existing body of anti-poverty research into China's ethnic minority areas and proposes recommendations for deepening and expanding such research.

Results and discussion

Anti-poverty research into China's ethnic minority areas from 1978 to 2012

Thanks to the economic development and poverty alleviation policies implemented by successive Chinese governments, China's rural economy has experienced rapid development since reform and opening up in 1978. This has resulted in a substantial reduction in the rural poor population, decreasing from 250 million in 1978 to 40.07 million in 2008. However, the overall progress in poverty alleviation within ethnic minority areas has been less substantial. According to *The Rural Poverty Monitoring Results of Ethnic Autonomous Areas in 2007* published by the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (NEAC) of China, ethnic autonomous areas accounted for as much as 52.3% of China's rural poor population. In essence, China's poor population has become increasingly concentrated in ethnic minority areas. This issue has garnered widespread attention from Chinese academic circles, leading to an increased number of scholars exploring the conditions and causes of poverty, as well as the strategies for its reduction in China's ethnic minority areas during this period.

Over the 34-year period from 1978 to 2012, it is worth noting that the concepts of poverty, national poverty alleviation policies, and socio-economic development have all undergone distinct phases of development. Regarding the concept of poverty, from 1978 to 1990, the academic community's understanding of poverty primarily centered on economic aspects, with absolute poverty as the main focus. This perspective also formed the basis of the Chinese government's anti-poverty policies and initiatives during this period. Since the 1990s, there has been a gradual shift in the academic definition of poverty from a purely economic dimension to having both economic and social dimensions. However, most of the Chinese government's anti-poverty policies and practices continued to adhere to the standards of the previous stage (Chen 2006). In the twenty-first century, both the Chinese government and academia expanded their conceptualization of poverty to include a broader spectrum of basic human needs, such as health and education (Feng 2010).

During this period, China's poverty alleviation policies and initiatives progressed through three distinct stages. The first stage, spanning from 1978 to 1985, was characterized by rural reform. Here, the focus of China's poverty alleviation policies and practices was on improving agricultural infrastructure and promoting livestock and aquaculture farming through rural reforms including the household contracting system for farmland, and preferential policies, including special poverty alleviation policies. The primary objective was to ensure that the rural impoverished population had enough food and clothing, and their right to subsistence was safeguarded. In the second stage, from 1986 to 2000, China's poverty alleviation policies and initiatives experienced a shift from a relief-oriented approach to an economic development-oriented approach. This shift was characterized by a departure from the previous practice of evenly distributing poverty alleviation funds among the impoverished population. Instead, the implementation of development projects and the increase of income of individuals living in poverty were prioritized. Concurrently, poverty alleviation resources began to concentrate in remote mountainous areas and information-deprived regions in the central and western parts of the country. Technological advancements and improvements to the quality of farmers played a pivotal role in poverty alleviation efforts during this stage. In the third stage, from 2001 to 2012, China established a comprehensive framework for poverty alleviation. In 2002, the Chinese government set goals for building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, to address the issue of incomplete and unbalanced development. The government directed poverty alleviation resources toward specific impoverished villages, with a primary focus on the concentrated and contiguous areas identified by the State Council Leading Group of Poverty Alleviation and Development (Tang et al. 2019; Shen 2017; Cui et al. 2019). To realize the goal of a comprehensive moderately prosperous society, China established a comprehensive framework for poverty alleviation encompassing government-sponsored projects, sector-specific programs, and social assistance, all complementing each other. It also featured a social poverty alleviation system that emphasized coordination among regions, departments, and organizations, engaging society as a whole in the endeavor.

Identification and assessment of poverty in China's ethnic minority areas (1978–2012)

The State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development of China has devised a weighted poverty index composed of eight indicators for assessing and ranking poverty in impoverished villages and townships. These indicators include annual per capita grain production, per capita cash income, the percentage of low-quality houses, the percentage of households with poor access to potable water, the percentage of natural villages with reliable access to electricity, the percentage of natural villages with road access to the county seat, the percentage of women with long-term health problems, and the percentage of eligible children not attending school. However, it is worth noting that the criteria for poverty identification in specific ethnic minority areas are not standardized. For instance, in Guizhou Province, the selection of poor villages is based on the per capita net income of farmers (the average per capita net income of farmers in the three years from 1997 to 1999). Guo Peixia³ highlighted that while a single economic indicator can reflect the positive demands of the market, it is important not to rely solely on it but also to consider the challenges posed by the vague monetary concept of poverty in China's ethnic minority regions, the difficulty in converting output into monetary income, and the underdeveloped non-agricultural sectors. As such, land, a critical resource for the livelihoods of the impoverished population, should be incorporated as a useful indicator for distinguishing poverty. The inclusion should encompass both quantity and quality of per capita land ownership as complementary reference standards in the existing indicator framework (Guo 2007). Li Ruihua advocated for the establishment of a specific poverty assessment index system tailored to China's ethnic minority areas (Li 2010). The poverty line should be set first for initial identification, which would be subject to periodic revision reflecting changes in economic development, income levels, and the social environment. On this basis, a comprehensive assessment of the breadth, depth and trends of poverty should be conducted. Specifically, a comprehensive poverty assessment index system should encompass poverty incidence, poverty gap, Sen poverty index, the FGT poverty index, poverty measures sensitive to income distribution, poverty index based on social welfare functions, multidimensional poverty measures, and other relevant indicators.

China's ethnic minority regions exhibit distinctive characteristics in terms of poverty. They not only grapple with a large impoverished population, high poverty incidence rate, and deep-rooted poverty (Zheng 2003) but also suffer from severe constraints in knowledge resources and a low level of human development (Hu and Wen 2004). Huang Songwen argued that the pace of poverty reduction in China's ethnic minority regions is slowing down (Huang 2004). With the advancement of poverty alleviation work, the characteristics of geographically concentrated distribution of the impoverished population in China's rural ethnic minority areas are becoming increasingly evident. Tang Jian and Li Xiaoqing have asserted that rural poverty in ethnic minority areas of western China not only reflects economic hardship and

³ The names of Chinese scholars in the main text of this paper follow the Chinese rule of Chinese surnames first.

consumption poverty, but also encompasses a lack of knowledge and skills, inadequate social security coverage, and limited awareness of the market economy (Tang and Li 2006). Zhu Mingxi and others specifically examine the livelihood challenges of rural impoverished households in China's ethnic minority areas. They identified key livelihood obstacles, including insufficient per capita arable land, insufficient per capita grain production, limited livestock commodity rates, remote access to agricultural markets, dependence on a single source of cash income, and a higher proportion of essential consumption expenses in total expenditure (Zhu et al. 2008). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the issue of inadequate development capacity in China's ethnic minority regions has gained prominence (Xu 2010).

Cause analysis of poverty in China's ethnic minority areas (1978–2012)

The causes of poverty in China's ethnic minority areas are complex, an influenced by a combination of historical, geographical, and social factors (Ye 1994). These regions are typically characterized by their remote locations, harsh natural conditions, and inadequate infrastructure. In addition, they tend to exhibit underdeveloped commodity economies, an insufficient industrial structure with outdated production methods, a conservative mindset, and a shortage of both skilled individuals and development funds (Yang 2005). These interrelated factors within China's ethnic minority regions reinforce each other, resulting in pervasive poverty and underdevelopment (Zhao 1986). In an effort to comprehensively understand the causes of poverty, Chinese scholars have explored this issue from various disciplinary perspectives. First, from an anthropological standpoint, Zheng Xiaoyun attributed poverty in China's ethnic minority areas to a "cultural gap" during periods of social change (Zheng 1989). Liao Yang viewed this cultural imbalance as the fundamental driver of poverty (Liao 2010). Second, from a sociological perspective, studies have highlighted that rural poverty in ethnic minority areas is the cumulative outcome of various factors, taking into account the evolving social system as a whole. These factors encompass the natural environment, local poverty culture, the overall low level of education of farmers (Zhang 2008), social and historical elements, and the unique social operating mechanisms and organizational structures in ethnic minority areas. All of these factors have a significant impact on the prevalence of poverty (Guo 2008; Lang 2000). Third, from an economic perspective, Wang Laixi asserted that ethnic minority areas in China often struggle to effectively transform their natural resource advantages into economic benefits, but instead find themselves "bound by overly rich resources" (Wang 2007). Additionally, some scholars have emphasized the important role of regional factors in perpetuating poverty in China's ethnic minority areas. Poverty in such areas is often linked to lagging local development (Tong and Wang 2006) as well as limited access to external knowledge, technology, civilization, and culture due to geographic isolation (Hu and Wen 2004). Cheng Housi and others noted that the geographical isolation of China's ethnic minority areas has led to closed economic, technological, and cultural systems, leading to a form of isolationism in social and economic development (Cheng et al. 1999).

Exploration of diversified anti-poverty approaches in China's ethnic minority areas (1978–2012)

The proposed anti-poverty approaches by scholars have been varied, dependent on the underlying causes of poverty in China's ethnic minority areas. The first approach emphasized the pivotal role of the commodity economy in poverty alleviation and considered it as the only way to change the poverty situation in China's ethnic minority areas (Ma 1986). Some scholars have suggested cultivating multi-level commodity and factor markets across various economic sectors, tailored to local conditions, with a continued focus on improving market functionality (Yang 1994). The second approach recognizes the value of technology in the battle against poverty. For some scholars, science and technology constitute the driving force behind rapid economic development in China's ethnic minority areas (Huang 1993). They contend that the fundamental way to escape poverty and achieve prosperity in China's ethnic minority areas rests on substantial progress in science and technology (Cai 1990). The third approach to poverty reduction emphasizes the role of culture. This perspective highlights that the culture of poverty, which can be transmitted from generation to generation, poses a significant obstacle to economic growth in China's ethnic minority areas. Consequently, addressing poverty through cultural interventions is essential for long-term poverty eradication (Lu 2011). The fourth approach underscores the integration of poverty alleviation and disaster relief in China's ethnic minority areas. Scholars Zhuang Tianhui and Zhang Jun have observed a close relationship between poverty and disasters in these areas, as the factors that cause poverty are also conducive to the formation of disasters (Zhuang and Zhang 2012). Therefore, they advocate for a coordinated approach that combines poverty reduction and development efforts with disaster prevention and mitigation measures to achieve progress.

Reflection on problems in the fight against poverty in China's ethnic minority areas (1978–2012)

In the realm of poverty alleviation principles, vague concepts and parochial consciousness in China's ethnic minority areas have seriously hindered poverty alleviation (Hu 1989). These include tendencies towards egalitarianism in the allocation of poverty alleviation funds, reliance, and conservatism in poverty alleviation, farmers' limited sense of responsibility, unrealistic pursuit of wealth divorced from economic reality, and expectations of benefits that exceed actual productivity. Concerning poverty alleviation mechanisms, the anti-poverty mechanism is plagued by inefficiency, and there is a notable absence of a robust poverty alleviation assessment mechanism. Additionally, the audit and disclosure mechanism for poverty alleviation funds remains imperfect (Jiang and Zhang 2007). Furthermore, a new development mechanism capable of breaking through the "closed dual structure" has yet to emerge in China's ethnic minority areas. As a result, the large-scale investments from the state have triggered a series of adverse effects, including incapacity, isolation, degeneration, distortion,

and cyclical repercussions (Ye 1994). Regarding poverty alleviation models, the government-led approach has diminished the role of market mechanisms in regulating the economic development of impoverished areas. The regional model also requires further improvement (Song and Zhou 2010). In terms of poverty alleviation and development policies in China's ethnic minority areas, there is a pronounced bias towards purely economic measures (Hu and Wen 2004). These policies rigidly pursue single strategic objectives, neglecting the need for comprehensive development strategies and policy guarantee systems (Wen 1998).

Anti-poverty research into China's ethnic minority areas from 2013 to 2020

Since 2013, the central government of China has increasingly prioritized the achievement of common prosperity for all, introducing a series of innovative ideas, principles, and requirements to firmly advance this goal. In response to the evolving landscape and changing dynamics of the poverty problem of China's ethnic minority areas, the new central leadership with Xi Jinping at its core, has creatively introduced the strategy of targeted poverty alleviation. This strategy has unfolded alongside existing program adjustments, model transformations, and the enrichment of poverty alleviation policies. In this new era, Chinese scholars have begun to reassess the challenges of poverty and anti-poverty efforts in China's ethnic minority areas, with a gradual focal shift toward targeted poverty alleviation and eradication. Concurrently, the research paradigm has been improved, research content has been enriched, and research perspectives have diversified. In 2013, China formally proposed the "targeted poverty alleviation" policy, which put forward higher requirements for poverty identification, targeted assistance, poverty alleviation management, and assessment. Under this policy, poverty alleviation projects have been tailored to the specific needs of the different impoverished groups. These included support for production and employment development, relocation and resettlement initiatives, ecological conservation efforts, educational enhancements, and subsistence allowance policies. The government has mobilized all sectors of society to participate in the poverty alleviation efforts.

The targeted poverty alleviation policy represents a significant strategic shift in the new era, which is implemented from targeted village to household, with tailored assistance measures, standardized management processes, and assessment goals that do not extend beyond traditional GDP indicators (Wang et al. 2016). In line with these adjustments in the poverty alleviation agenda, model transformation, and the enrichment of related policies, Chinese scholars have embarked on a reevaluation of the poverty and anti-poverty challenges in China's ethnic minority areas in this new era. The focus has gradually shifted towards targeted poverty alleviation and eradication. In parallel, the research paradigm has been enhanced, with enriched research content and diversified perspectives.

Refined research paradigm: taking into account both the whole and the individual (2013–2020)

Compared to the previous stage, Chinese scholars at this stage had begun to pay closer attention to the complex and diverse individual variations in poverty across China's ethnic minority areas, while also examining the broader poverty problem in these areas.

Comprehensive anti-poverty research on China's ethnic minority areas The holistic research paradigm analyzes the multifaceted aspects of poverty, and the systems, approaches, and principles of poverty alleviation comprehensively across China's impoverished ethnic minority areas. Overall, poverty in these areas is marked by historical complexity, vulnerability, and sensitivity (Li 2016). It manifests as a web of spatial poverty, institutional poverty, capacity poverty, and cultural poverty, all intricately interwoven among China's ethnic minority areas (Yuan 2016). In such areas, the targeted poverty alleviation model offers the advantages of precision and efficiency, addressing the limitations of the previous poverty alleviation system. These limitations include slow institutional change, high reliance on formal institutional channels, challenges in managing principal-agent relationships, and potential conflicts between informal institutions, such as moral norms and formal poverty alleviation mechanisms (Zhao et al. 2017). Regarding poverty alleviation principles, the targeted approach in China's ethnic minority areas should adhere to the five new principles of development: "innovation, coordination, green, open, and shared" (Zhu et al. 2016). Some scholars have proposed that poverty alleviation and development in the concentrated contiguous ethnic minority areas facing extreme poverty in China should follow the philosophy of inclusive green development, considering their unique development characteristics (Zheng 2016).

Micro-level investigation of individual differences in poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas The micro research paradigm focuses research on the targeted poverty alleviation of specific villages in China or a certain ethnic group. In a case study of a village in southern Xinjiang, Kong Lingying and others analyzed practical challenges associated with aligning targeted poverty alleviation projects with impoverished villages. They identified these challenges as stemming from the dual influence of local dynamics and the multiple organizations' logic at various levels under the project system (Kong et al. 2017). Li Hui summarized the outcomes and challenges of targeted poverty alleviation in Village A of Linxia County. Based on a comprehensive review of the targeted practices, Li gave recommendations in three areas: enhancing the targeted poverty alleviation policies' specificity, innovating targeted poverty alleviation measures, and fostering a shift in the poverty alleviation mindset (Li 2017). Zhu Yufu and Wu Shuhua conducted research on the targeted poverty

alleviation of Monba and Lhoba ethnic groups, which both have small populations. They concluded that the targeted poverty alleviation of such small ethnic groups in China should develop distinctive industries based on the unique resource endowments of these groups in China (Zhu and Wu 2018).

Research focus: targeted poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas (2013–2020)

During this stage, Chinese scholars conducted extensive and in-depth discussions on targeted poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas, exploring various dimensions such as precise identification, targeted assistance, key contributors, and performance evaluation.

Precise identification of poverty in China's ethnic minority areas The prevailing method for measuring poverty involves calculating poverty incidence based on income and consumption (Yang et al. 2015). However, scholars argue that employing uniform indicators to identify poverty in China's ethnic minority areas may not be suitable, given the complex array of contributing factors (Liu et al. 2018). Liu Xiaomin holds that rural poverty in China's ethnic minority areas is more multidimensional than that in non-ethnic minority areas (Liu 2017). Building on this insight, she proposed the adoption of a multidimensional poverty index (MPI) system for China's ethnic minority areas. This system assesses the poverty of farmers from various angles, including education, geographic terrain, susceptibility to natural disasters, and fixed asset ownership (Liu 2017). Another study by Wu Xiumin and others analyzed poverty among impoverished rural households in China's ethnic minority areas. Their analysis utilized survey data collected from 3,260 impoverished rural households in 163 villages. The focus was on poverty indicators such as housing conditions, access to fuel, educational opportunities, and labor capacity (Wu et al. 2016). In addition, some scholars incorporated capacity poverty and rights-based poverty of impoverished households in China's ethnic minority areas into the multidimensional indicators of poverty. This approach further explained the internal intricacies of multidimensional poverty (Wang and Gao 2019).

Targeted assistance for poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas Post-2013, research conducted by Chinese academics on targeted assistance in China's ethnic minority areas has primarily focused on aspects such as economic development, education, financial measures, and improvement in living conditions.

First, industry-based poverty alleviation has emerged as a crucial strategy. The development of characteristic industries based on local resource endowments is essential for the development and the poverty alleviation of ethnic minority regions in China (Chen 2017). Based on the survey data of 341 impoverished households across three ethnic autonomous counties in Guizhou Province, Liu Weibai and others examined the impact of poverty alleviation policies through economic development on the livelihood strategies and well-being of impoverished rural households in China's ethnic minority areas. They employed statistical methods like the Probit model and the

generalized exact matching method (Liu et al. 2019). Their findings revealed that this policy facilitated the favorable transformation of the livelihood of farmers, increased value-adding labor productivity, and raised wealth-seeking motivation among poor households. Consequently, poverty levels were reduced, vulnerability decreased, both among the impoverished and those who had escaped poverty (Li and Lu 2020). On the basis of the significant role of this policy in poverty reduction, scholars have further explored various approaches and strategies for poverty alleviation via the promotion of economic development in China's ethnic minority areas. Zhang Qi and others proposed that targeted poverty alleviation should "mobilize poor households, rural economic organizations, enterprises, and the government as an organic whole to secure the high-quality supply of capital, technology, labor, system, land, and ethnic characteristic resources" (Zhang et al. 2019). Moreover, in an era of rapid development of science and technology represented by the Internet, an increasing number of scholars have highlighted the important role of Internet technology in creating new economic activity for poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas (Wang and Wu 2016; Mo and Zhang 2017; Zheng 2018a, b).

Tourism has emerged as a critical industry and major research focus for Chinese scholars within the context of poverty alleviation driven by economic development in China's ethnic minority areas. Shu Xiaolin regarded tourism as the preferred strategy for these ethnic minority areas to escape poverty and achieve leapfrog development (Shu 2016). Tourism, specifically, can create a virtuous circle of poverty reduction by providing income opportunities, enhancing self-development capabilities, and enabling sustainable livelihoods for impoverished populations (Li et al. 2017). In the future, the government should promote tourism in China's ethnic minority areas by advocating top-level design, innovating the approaches of tourism poverty alleviation, scaling up investment in human capital, expanding the proportion of inclusive employment in tourism, developing unique tourism products, and establishing robust ecological compensation mechanisms (Wang and Wang 2018). Simultaneously, the integration of ethnic culture into tourism should be encouraged through the revitalization and industrialization of ethnic festival culture, ethnic plant culture, commercial cultural heritage, etc.⁴ (Zhang 2020).

Second, education-based poverty alleviation has also been advocated for. Some scholars believe that the key to fighting poverty in China's ethnic minority regions is to "support self-confidence before poverty reduction". They stress the importance of increasing the accessibility of education in these areas and enhancing the human capital of the impoverished. Wang Sanguì and others advocate for a combination of cultivating self-confidence and improving educational opportunities to alleviate poverty (Wang et al. 2019). Implementing targeted measures to develop education can empower impoverished individuals to develop themselves

⁴ "Tourism revitalization" refers to the static protection of tourism resources and the dynamic exploitation and utilization, reproduction, inheritance, and development of tourism resources in the process of boosting tourism, emphasizing spatial coordination and integrated development in the holistic protection of culture.

and cultivate their inner drive to escape poverty. Chen Lipeng and others conducted an analysis of two typical education-based models of poverty alleviation in Inner Mongolia and Guangxi as examples: comprehensive education spanning from preschool to vocational education and targeted educational assistance (Chen et al. 2017). Based on the research on Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province, Wu Benjian and others proposed a high-quality poverty alleviation approach for China's severely impoverished ethnic minority areas by reforming and improving the education model to support "diversified subjects, full coverage, and flexible forms" (Wu et al. 2019).

Third, living conditions should be improved for poverty alleviation. Enhancing the living conditions of impoverished households is another important strategy for realizing poverty reduction objectives and ultimately modernizing ethnic minority areas in China. Fang Sumei summarized the model of Huanjiang Maonan Autonomous County in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region as "supporting science and technology, improving the self-development capacity of farmers, innovating governance of migrant communities, and considering local realities" (Fang 2018). However, some scholars have raised concerns about the problems that persist in the process of improving living conditions for impoverished households in China's ethnic minority areas. These challenges encompass poor awareness regarding the importance of improving living conditions for the impoverished population, a substantial funding gap for improving living conditions, and limited follow-up support for impoverished households (Wei and Song 2018). Ding Bo suggests that poor households go through stages of spatial deconstruction, rupture, and reconstruction during the process of improving their living environments. It is necessary to take multiple measures to help poor households adapt to new living environments and achieve internal development in new communities (Ding 2020). Scholars have also emphasized that when improving living environments, the agency of the recipients must also be considered, to stimulate the internal motivation of the poor, and respect the traditional culture and customs of ethnic minorities (Li and Zhang 2017).

Fourth, financial measures have been adopted for poverty alleviation. As an important model for development-oriented poverty alleviation, financial measures provide financial support for enhancing rural infrastructure, fostering characteristic industries, and assisting impoverished households in areas like farming and children's education. This approach is widely recognized as the most effective way to help China's ethnic minority areas to overcome poverty (Gao 2016). It emphasizes the precise alignment of financial services with characteristic industries, which is of great practical significance for targeted poverty alleviation and eradication in China's ethnic minority areas (Sun 2016). However, improperly implemented financial measures will produce various adverse consequences. For instance, the practice of "interest to support the principal," which involves accumulating debt, may trap poor households in a cycle of credit-induced poverty when they struggle to repay the principal on time (Shi 2019). In addition, it is unlikely that the problem of poverty in China's ethnic minority areas can be fundamentally resolved by sole reliance on fiscal and financial support (Lu et al. 2016). Therefore, credit services aimed at poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas

should prioritize empowering households to enhance their self-reliance and development capacity (Gao 2016). Fiscal and financial policies for supporting agriculture should be combined with favorable services offered by financial institutions to bolster the capacity for independent development of China's poor ethnic minority areas (Sun 2016). In addition, it is necessary to further establish and improve risk and supervision mechanisms for financial measures aimed at poverty alleviation (Yang and Li 2019).

Acknowledging special participants in the battle against poverty in China's ethnic minority areas The engagement of rural elites in poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas has garnered attention in research. Studies have emphasized that rural elites make significant unique contributions to improving the effectiveness of poverty alleviation in these regions (Wu 2019). Their engagement can create an "elite assistance" effect by leveraging their own capital advantages and the formal power structures and kinship habits existing in specific fields (Liu and Liu 2021). However, some scholars have argued that the participation of rural elites in poverty alleviation has led to the appropriation of resources meant for poverty alleviation in collaboration with village-level organizations (Kong et al. 2017). To address this issue, they have proposed the establishment of a robust rural governance system that combines the principles of self-governance, law, and virtue, while cultivating civic awareness among villagers (Wang and Liu 2020). Additionally, the role of the resident first secretary⁵ has been highlighted. Resident first secretaries play a crucial role in directly assisting the impoverished at the grassroots level in China's targeted poverty alleviation strategy (He et al. 2018). In essence, this collaborative anti-poverty governance mechanism, with the first secretary acting as a bridge, leverages the strengths of each entity, including capital, information, resources, and technology, through equal dialogue and consultation among various entities with a common goal (Li et al. 2020).

Poverty alleviation performance evaluation Zhao Lihong and others developed a comprehensive performance evaluation index system to assess the effectiveness of poverty alleviation efforts in China's ethnic minority areas. Their system covered dimensions related to the economy, society, and poverty. To evaluate the performance of poverty alleviation and development in these areas, they applied the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) (Zhao et al. 2018). Li Jun and others established an evaluation system that comprised five primary indicators including poverty alleviation performance, poverty alleviation accuracy, infrastructure, public services, and internal driving force. The system also included 17 secondary indicators, and 50 tertiary indicators to provide a comprehensive assessment (Li et al. 2018). Based on the data from a 2014 survey in ethnic minority areas of China, Liu Xiaomin conducted

⁵ Resident first secretaries are the officials of the Communist Party of China selected from governments, public institutions, and state-owned enterprises to serve as first secretaries in poor villages. They work to promote rural revitalization on all fronts and consolidate and expand the achievements in poverty alleviation.

an empirical evaluation of the performance of rural poverty alleviation and development in these regions. This evaluation employed path analysis from the perspective of farmers' satisfaction (Liu 2016). Jiao Keyuan and Xu Yanping used time-series principal component analysis to evaluate the performance of poverty alleviation and development in China's ethnic minority areas. Their evaluation considered factors related to poverty foundation, human development, and production environment (Jiao and Xu 2015).

Diversified research perspectives: multiple dimensions such as gender, capital and space (2013–2020)

At this stage, research on poverty in China's ethnic minority areas extended into economic and sociological perspectives. For instance, researchers applied the "inter-phase operation" theory from ethnic economics to assess the advantages and disadvantages of poverty alleviation policies in these areas (He 2018). They also utilized sociological theories, including social action theory, to examine the system of targeted poverty alleviation through compulsory education in China's concentrated contiguous areas of extreme poverty (Li 2019). Additionally, various research perspectives, including gender, space, and capital were introduced into studies. For example, Li Zhuo and Zuo Ting conducted an anti-poverty study of China's ethnic minority areas through a gender lens, finding that China's current targeted poverty alleviation strategy overlooks gender inequalities within families (Li and Zuo 2018). Their findings suggested a need to prioritize addressing women's poverty, targeting the specific needs of women in China's severely impoverished areas, and enhancing the leadership roles of women in development initiatives. He Jin and Xiang Deping discussed the characteristics and causes of poverty among ethnic minority women in China, proposing poverty alleviation concepts and mechanisms centred on women's participation (He and Xiang 2019). Some scholars examined the battle against poverty from the perspective of capital, emphasizing the pivotal role of social capital in addressing deep poverty in China's ethnic minority areas (Cheng 2020). Furthermore, some scholars investigated poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas through the lens of spatial poverty theory. Zhang Lijun and others highlighted that the spatial poverty of ethnic minority areas in western China is rooted in the "geographical capital" structure, characterized by spatial barriers created by nature and relative differences in social-spatial layout. These barriers result in unequal distribution of social resources and opportunities across different areas (Zhang et al. 2015). Similarly, Xiang Linglin and others noted the spatial distribution patterns of impoverished ethnic minority areas in southwest China, where there is a significant overlap between impoverished areas, ecologically vulnerable regions, and ethnic areas (Xiang et al. 2013). Furthermore, Ou Haiyan and Huang Guoyong explored the relationship between natural geographical conditions and poverty and concluded that the natural geographical environment significantly affects farmers' income and the rural poverty rate in China (Ou and Huang 2015).

Further acknowledgment of the particularities of China's ethnic minority areas in alleviating poverty (2013–2020)

Targeted poverty alleviation efforts in China's ethnic minority areas have taken ethnic unity into consideration. The goal of eradicating poverty in these areas and promoting unity among all ethnic groups are logically compatible in five aspects: goals, implementing bodies, target groups, work methods, and performance evaluation (You et al. 2018). Scholars like Wu Yujun and He Xie observed that equal citizenship is fundamental to targeted poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas, as it can bolster the national identity of ethnic minorities (Wu and He 2019). Analyzing anti-poverty practices in ethnic areas over the past seven decades, Liu Xiaomin has examined interactions, exchanges, and integration among all ethnic groups. It was found that national policy support and social assistance, including pairing-off assistance, collaboration between eastern and western regions and targeted assistance, have deepened ethnic interactions, communication, and integration and ultimately fostered unity and common prosperity of all ethnic groups in China (Liu 2019). Contrastingly, scholars have recognized the great value of unique local knowledge in poverty alleviation efforts in China's ethnic minority areas (Zuo et al. 2019). Some scholars have proposed that the formulation of poverty alleviation policies and programs for China's ethnic minority areas should take into full account the religious beliefs and cultural traditions of ethnic minorities, gradually pushing for the "secularization" of religions (Li and Xing 2018); Others have recommended guiding the involvement of religious circles in targeted poverty alleviation and eradication efforts, to enhance their sense of identity and belonging to the Chinese nation (Li and Geng 2018).

The experience of poverty alleviation with Chinese characteristics gained in ethnic minority areas (2013–2020)

Wang Yanzhong and Ding Sai summarized the practices of poverty alleviation in China's ethnic minority areas in four aspects: a) Attaching great importance to the fight against poverty and setting clear goals and responsibilities at various levels; b) Increasing financial investment and consolidating resources from across the country to enhance the quality and efficiency of poverty alleviation efforts; c) Applying innovative methods of poverty alleviation tailored to local conditions, driving overall economic and social development alongside poverty alleviation, and establishing a robust and stable long-term mechanism of poverty alleviation; and d) Promoting poverty alleviation through the CPC building, employing a range of measures such as paired-up assistance, resident teams, and targeted assistance from the CPC, government and military entities, as well as enterprises, and public institutions at all levels. These efforts aimed to bolster self-confidence, enhance capabilities, and encourage multi-party collaboration to combat poverty (Wang and Ding 2020).

Some scholars have further refined the experiences of targeted poverty eradication in China's ethnic minority areas, focusing on modernizing the governance system and capacity in the new era. They argue that the key to precision poverty alleviation

in these areas lies in promoting progressive practices through “precision” thinking. This involves balancing national coordinated development and regional differential development, while effectively managing the relationship among the country, ethnic regions, and the world. They advocate for the creation of a “multi-party collaborative” pattern (Shao et al. 2020). Lu Ni and Zhang Jijiao have proposed a poverty alleviation model that integrates the protection of intangible cultural heritage with poverty alleviation and development, based on the neoclassical structural–functional theory (Lu and Zhang 2020).

Post-2020 anti-poverty research into China’s ethnic minority areas

In 2020, China achieved a significant milestone by successfully eliminating overall regional poverty, marking a resounding victory in the fight against poverty. The path leading from poverty alleviation to rural revitalization has become the essential route for advancing socialism with Chinese characteristics, eliminating poverty, enhancing the well-being of the people, and gradually realizing common prosperity. In the wake of this achievement, Chinese scholars have shifted their focus towards other topics including the vulnerability and risk associated with a potential return to poverty among previously impoverished populations in ethnic minority areas, governance strategies for addressing relative poverty and multidimensional poverty to further promote common prosperity within ethnic minority areas, as well as the sustained reinforcement of poverty alleviation accomplishments and its effective integration with the broader goals of rural revitalization.

Research on the vulnerability of populations transitioning out of poverty and the risk of returning to poverty in China’s ethnic minority areas during the transition period (2020–)⁶

Ai Bin and others conducted an analysis using 2020 data from China’s dynamic management system of healthcare services for poverty alleviation. They examined the vulnerability of populations lifted out of poverty in China’s ethnic minority areas across three exposure factors: region, age, and education. The study also considered the sensitivity factors of technology gap, funding gap, disease, and resilience (Ai et al. 2021). Huang Guoqing and others developed a poverty-returning risk assessment system for households that had been lifted out of poverty in China’s ethnic minority areas. This system, based on the livelihood vulnerability analysis framework, found that human and financial risks are the primary contributors to the risk of returning to poverty (Huang et al. 2021). Geng Xin categorized the risk of

⁶ A five-year transition period will be set for countries that have shaken off poverty, according to the *Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Comprehensively Promoting Rural Revitalization and Accelerating the Modernization of Agriculture and Rural Areas*. During this period, the major assistance policies will remain unchanged to gradually realize a smooth transition from concentrated support for poverty eradication to push for comprehensive rural revitalization.

returning to poverty in China's ethnic minority areas into four types: capacity deficit, policy-related, environmental, and developmental. The study highlighted the significant influence of factors such as ethnicity, literacy, household attributes, and the causes of poverty on the likelihood of returning to poverty (Geng 2020).

The transformation of poverty governance in China's ethnic minority areas in the post-poverty era (2020–)

As the problem of unbalanced and inadequate development persists after 2020, poverty governance in China's ethnic minority areas has shifted its focus from addressing basic survival challenges to fostering development and ensuring equitable sharing of the fruits of development (Zheng 2018a, b). Furthermore, the emphasis has transitioned from primarily tackling income poverty to addressing multidimensional poverty, and from a rural-centric approach to poverty alleviation to promoting coordinated urban–rural development (Wang and Jing 2020). Ju Ying and others highlighted that relative poverty in China's formerly deeply impoverished areas is a result of various factors, including resources, culture, the market, as well as the quality of the impoverished population (Ju et al. 2021). Consequently, poverty governance in China's formerly deeply impoverished areas during the post-poverty era should be grounded in multidimensional poverty theory and support the sustainable development of these areas by guarding against and resolving natural risks, fostering industrial development, enhancing human capital, and improving social security mechanisms (Geng and Wang 2021).

Facilitating effective consolidation of poverty alleviation achievements with rural revitalization (2020–)

Problem analysis In the post-poverty era, China's ethnic minority areas, particularly those that were formerly severely impoverished, faced a range of challenges, such as low quality of economic development, cultural weaknesses, heightened pressure on ecological preservation, deficiencies in basic public services, talent shortages (Li Chungeng and Chen Wenmei 2021), subpar living conditions and quality of life, implicit resistance stemming from ethnic and cultural diversity (Wang and He 2021), and inefficient institutional mechanisms (Ma Ximei 2020).

Exploration of approaches Advocates of various cultural avenues have proposed that the key to effectively linking poverty alleviation achievements with rural revitalization in China's ethnic minority areas lies in promoting the flow and connectivity of factors, based on internal resource endowments and external social resource networks. This approach seeks to facilitate the natural connection between the “natural order” within rural society and the “constructive order” embedded in the outside world (Geng 2021). Additionally, the contribution of rural cultural heritage, represented by traditional ethnic festivals, to rural revitalization is worth special attention (Zhang and Hou 2020). The ecological approach emphasizes the significance of ecological revitalization in consolidating poverty alleviation achievements and

facilitating the effective linkage with rural revitalization in China's ethnic minority areas. Leveraging the advantage of local natural ecological culture, based on local natural ecological space and cultural fields, can provide guaranteed institutional support for ecological revitalization, achieving effective linkage by means of institutional guidance, industrial alignment, and technological innovation (Zhou 2021). In the third approach, scholars with an industrial sector-centric perspective positioned industries as fundamental drivers in consolidating poverty alleviation achievements and promoting effective linkage with rural revitalization in China's ethnic minority areas. They advocate for cultivating and developing industrial forms with competitive advantages in accordance with the "market logic + government logic" idea. This is based on the local endowment structure of production factors such as resources, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship, so as to realize rural revitalization and common prosperity in China's ethnic minority areas (Zhu 2020).

Summary of local experiences Drawing on the micro-level survey data of 1,143 households in 85 villages of 10 provinces in western China, Wang Zhizhang and Yang Zhihong explored approaches to integrating poverty alleviation and rural revitalization in western China. Their findings emphasize the need to optimize the linkage mechanism, establish a robust foundation for industrial development, enhance rural governance and ecological progress, and foster a culture of shared prosperity to facilitate positive interaction between the two (Wang and Yan 2020). Other scholars have conducted research on the linkage between poverty alleviation and rural revitalization in a single region (province and ethnic group) in China. For instance, Mo Jianlin examined practices in Tuyao settlements in Hezhou City and recommended that ethnic minority areas in western China should leverage their unique natural resource and cultural resources to promote the transformation and upgrading of traditional industries according to local conditions as a long-term development and revitalization approach (Mo 2021). Wu Dongmei argued that the effective linkage between poverty alleviation and rural revitalization in Tibet should prioritize institutional mechanisms, with poverty reduction practices smoothly transitioning through revitalization across industry, organization, ecology, culture, and talent (Wu 2021).

Conclusion and outlook

Over the course of more than 40 years, since China launched its reform and opening-up policy in 1978, Chinese academics have conducted fruitful research on poverty reduction in China's ethnic minority areas. The outcomes of this research have not only been highly valuable in shaping poverty reduction practices in China's ethnic minority areas under the new development paradigm but also hold importance as a reference point for global poverty governance efforts. Nevertheless, it should be noted that anti-poverty research on China's ethnic minority areas still exhibits several shortcomings, primarily in three aspects. First, a significant portion of research is largely policy-oriented, with limited theoretical development. While the existing body of research on poverty reduction in China's ethnic minority areas has practical significance, it is largely centered on interpreting China's poverty alleviation

policies and lacks substantial theoretical development. As a result, a native theoretical framework and academic schools in this field are yet to be formed. Second, research outcomes are relatively scattered and lack systematic cohesion. Poverty reduction in China's ethnic minority areas is a systematic project, involving multiple stakeholders, strategies, and interrelated factors that form a cohesive whole. However, most of the existing studies focus on isolated elements within the battle against poverty, failing to construct a logical framework that encompasses the multi-faceted nature of the challenge. Third, research on the disparities in poverty reduction across China's ethnic minority areas is insufficient. Existing studies do not delve deeply into poverty reduction strategies beyond achieving specific poverty alleviation targets in China's ethnic minority areas. Furthermore, these studies do not adequately account for the regional, phased, complex, and dynamic characteristics of rural revitalization. This gap results in a lack of practical and targeted institutional analyses, mechanism construction, and policy design for effectively linking poverty alleviation with rural revitalization.

As China embarks on a new mission to build a modern socialist nation comprehensively, the need to promote the common prosperity of all ethnic groups in China becomes even more pronounced. Future research on poverty reduction in China's ethnic minority areas needs to further deepen and expand upon the following aspects. First, the focus of research should shift from mere policy interpretation to the construction of an academic discourse system. Through mapping patterns, enhancing mechanisms, and increasing the benefits of poverty reduction in China's ethnic minority areas, research should establish an innovative theoretical framework for poverty reduction and enrich the theoretical models for poverty reduction and common prosperity in China's ethnic minority areas. This effort will contribute to the construction of a unique theoretical discourse system with Chinese characteristics, concerning poverty reduction, outcome consolidation, and common prosperity in ethnic areas. Second, research should prioritize the mitigation of risks associated with returning to poverty and address issues of relative poverty and multidimensional poverty in China's ethnic minority areas. Additionally, research should also investigate the internal drivers and sustainable development of China's ethnic minority areas following the withdrawal of external assistance. Given the increasing frequency of unexpected disasters in recent years, more attention should be paid to the vulnerability, recovery, and resilience of China's ethnic minority areas in the face of unexpected disasters. This entails investigation into the post-disaster restoration of living structures, production systems, and social frameworks in these areas, so as to provide recommendations that bolster their resilience and disaster preparedness, reducing vulnerability. Third, research should adopt both macro and micro perspectives, considering both holistic and individual viewpoints, while taking into account the particularities and distinctions of ethnic minority areas, especially those inhabited by smaller ethnic minority groups in China (Zhang 2015). By doing so, researchers can develop practical models with regional characteristics for effectively linking poverty alleviation achievements with rural revitalization in China's ethnic minority areas. Special attention should be paid to ethnic interactions, exchanges, and integration during

the process of promoting rural revitalization and common prosperity in China's ethnic minority areas, thereby strengthening the sense of community within the Chinese nation and exploring a path toward common prosperity centered on development, stability, and integration.

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