

Poverty Alleviation in China's Ethnic Areas through Economic Restructuring

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Abstract

Ethnic minority groups in south and southwestern China are mostly found in mountainous regions leading traditional livelihood and where poverty is widespread. To win the battle against poverty, economic restructuring through shifting from primary towards secondary and tertiary activities is seen as key to raise productivity and income levels. This paper examines the outcome of applying the functions of the “umbrella structure” in the Liannan Yao Autonomous County, in the north of Guangdong Province. These include state-owned enterprises playing the leadership role while providing “paternal protection” to public-private joint venture enterprises, and “friendly protection” to private enterprises. The study focuses on the characteristics of the typical functions and examines how they have brought in different categories of investments into the county and help to improve income in different stages of development. As this is an ethnic cultural area, eco-tourism in Liannan is considered to have great potential in contributing to poverty alleviation efforts.

Keywords: Poverty alleviation battle, economic restructuring, Yao ethnic minority, “Umbrella Society,” investments

Introduction

In 2021, at the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, the Chinese government proclaimed a comprehensive victory in its battle against poverty. One of the main

battlefields was in the ethnic minority areas which were said to be the “hardest part of the bone” and had been earlier identified as the top priority of the poverty alleviation mission. In this regard, the introduction of the market economy has played a decisive role in prioritising resource allocation and revitalising economic development in the ethnic minority areas.

In the poverty alleviation battle in China’s ethnic areas, economic restructuring under the government “umbrella support” to enterprises has always been a great help. This support implies and is manifested in the government’s “paternal protection” to state-owned enterprises, “kinship protection” to joint ventures, and “friendly protection” to private enterprises. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) not only are symbolic of China’s socialist background embodying the basic nature of its public ownership economy before and after the introduction of economic reforms in 1978 but are also the key constituents and lifeblood of Chinese economy. SOEs are important economic pillars of China as they have remained predominant in sectors such as military-based industry, post and telecommunications, rail, road, seaport, aviation and public building infrastructure, petrochemicals, precision science and technology. Indeed, they are the main channels for public allocation of resources and economic management (Mankiv, 1999).

In underdeveloped ethnic areas where economic fundamentals are largely basic in nature, public allocation of resources is relatively scarce. Consequently, their key or “lifeline” resources would have to rely on local small SOEs, and co-operation between government and private capital to develop the regional economy in the form of joint-ventures. In running specialised businesses, public efficient allocation of resources to improve the competitiveness of enterprises is particularly important. For example, ethnic minority areas are often endowed with scenic landscapes, unique folk culture and sources of non-polluted organic food, and these can be used to attract tourists to improve local incomes.

From the government’s perspective, making efficient use of the characteristic resources in the minority areas is key to achieving the goal of poverty alleviation through economic development. Furthermore, helping private enterprises, especially those small and medium-sized enterprises in running viable and sustainable business can activate the market place and make it more dynamic. In this respect, local private enterprises in underdeveloped ethnic areas should be supported by subsidies, technical assistance and other marketing measures.

The Liannan Yao Autonomous County located in the north of Qingyuan City, Guangdong Province, is selected for this study. Bounded by Guangxi Province to the west and Hunan Province to the north, the County is the home of the Liannan Yao minority group that possess a unique socio-cultural background living in the midst of a mountainous area known for its nine tall peaks, and interspersed with streams and rice fields. With its numerous poor villages, the County is identified

as one of the poorest counties in Guangdong Province. The focus of this study is to investigate how the prevailing industrial and economic policies could help restructure the local economy in order to help the villagers to improve their incomes.

While studies conducted in China's developed regions focus on general economic and industrial issues, the study of China's underdeveloped ethnic minority areas need to address two intriguing questions. Firstly, between government-induced transformation or market forces, which is more critical in contributing towards alleviating the incidence of poverty? Secondly, what kind of social and economic structural transformation has taken place in the ethnic areas as a result of industrial policies introduced by the government? These two questions are key to the overall success in the battle against poverty in ethnic minority areas.

Conceptual Framework

Among the Western development theories, whether the classical school, neoclassical school, Keynesian school, or neoliberal school, the relationship between government and market has raised controversial arguments. In China, the role of the state has been debated as to whether the industrial policies of the "promising government" or the "market forces", are more effective. In this respect, the most significant is the "industrial dispute" between Zhang Weiying and Justin Yifu Lin (Jiang & Li, 2018). Lin Yifu (2017) believes that the essence of national economic development is the improvement of per capita income and living standards, and the development of national economy needs the joint role of an effective market and a promising government. However, Zhang Weiying (2017) believes that the government's discriminatory treatment of the targeted social groups aimed at enhancing their potential in economic performance or other purposes is more critical. In comparing whether the government or market-led operations is more effective in terms of resource allocation, Karl Polanyi (1944) summarised three basic types of human economic production modes: market economy, redistribution economy and reciprocal economy. However, it was difficult to carry out studies to compare these production modes in China at a time when the country was in the midst of economic and social transformation after the reforms.

In his separate studies, Li Peilin (1992, 1994, 1995) suggested that the present "social structure transformation" was an on-going process, and there was an "invisible hand" regulating both the "government" and "market" factors. Both government and market not only promote the development of the society, but they also play a role complementary to each other in resource allocations and industrial structure adjustments to support the state-led economic policy.

Zhang Jijiao's 2018 study on the "Chinese-style development" placed importance on the relationship between the government, the market and the society in resource allocation. This

relationship has determined the economic structural change and characteristics in the reformist Chinese society. Zhang's case studies on Wuzhishan City, Liannan Yao Autonomous County and other places have shown that the role of the government in restructuring industrial development has been instructive and key to bringing about economic performance. In the process, the role of the market and social forces has been increasingly critical.

The work of Zhang Jijiao and his co-workers on the “umbrella society” has an added value and significance in that it may serve as a model in interpreting the essence of China's “social structural transformation”. This model of “Umbrella-mode Society” highlights in particular the supportive relationship from the local government to local enterprises under a system of “territorial economy” supplemented by officially set standards. Under a set of sheltering conditions, local enterprises have benefited from effective resources support, and have enhanced their capacity to achieve higher levels of economic and social development (see Zhang & Li, 2017; Zhang & Yang, 2018). What then is an “umbrella society”?

By “umbrella society”, “paternal protection”, “kinship protection” and “friendly protection” discussed above may be seen as an innovative concept of China's economic and social structure transformation, in which state and enterprise relationship is characterised respectively by “fatherly support” for state-owned business, “relative support” for joint ventures, and “friendly support” for private enterprises (Zhang & Li, 2017; Zhang & Yang, 2018). Arguably, the conceptual origin of this “umbrella society” is an idea deeply rooted in Chinese ancient society where business operations were much dependent on dynastic policies.

The first feature of the “Umbrella Society” or that of “fatherly support” means that government resources in manpower, finance and natural resources are allocated generously in favour of state-owned enterprises. The second source of support is called “relative support” which means, during the feudal era, state economic support provided to sellers, while the third or “friendly support,” was given to private handicraft or manufacturing businesses.

Ever since the notion of “umbrella society” was made public in 2014, it has become popular as an “ideological” support for various businesses in China. Zhang Jijiao further elaborated this notion using the example of a restaurant as a “fatherly support” case. Other studies were carried out on such cases as the Xinglong Overseas Chinese Farm and the old Quanjude and Tongrentang, Yunnan Treasure, Guangxi pottery, and Zhejiang Jinhua Ham corporations. These studies explain the restructuring process involved in transforming the enterprises and how they were turned from loss-making into profitable and sustainable businesses (Zhang, 2014, 2016). This restructuring process will be the focus of our analysis on the Liannan Yao Autonomous County's success.

This paper analyses the “umbrella” relationship between government and enterprises under the national industrial policy and economic restructuring by which resources have been allocated

in support of economic growth. The three categories of government support functions will be examined in the ethnic minority area in Liannan Yao Autonomous County in Guangdong Province. During 2016 to 2018, a field study was conducted at Liannan to focus on the impact of economic restructuring on local enterprises. Data collection was also derived from the *Qingyuan Statistical Yearbook*, *Liannan Statistical Yearbook*, *Liannan Yearbook* as well as government and websites and those relating to operations of local Liannan enterprises in different stages of development. In 2017, we participated in the marketing management of Liannan enterprises to obtain a clear picture on how local agricultural products were marketed and to understand the role of the government authorities in the production and marketing system of local products and services.

The “Umbrella Society” Hypothesis

An attempt is made to relate the “Umbrella Society” hypothesis to the case of Liannan Yao Autonomous County. Situated at a mountainous area, the County was poor and largely rural and accessibility was difficult. In the context of the robust economy of Guangdong Province, Liannan in the years before 2000 was far behind the average socio-economic level of the province.

With highly focused efforts in implementing the new industrial policy in 2000, Liannan began to experience a gradual economic take-off, thanks to support from both the government and the corporate community. Progress has been clearly visible from 2000 onwards (Table 1) and also in improvements in GDP contributions showing a decline in the primary sector against the rise in the secondary and tertiary sectors (Table 2).

Table 1

Evolution of Economic Sector Weightage in Liannan County, 2000 to the Present

Stage	Leading Sector	Drivers
By 2000	Primary industry	Traditional agriculture
2000-2007	All primary, secondary and tertiary were close to each other in weightage	Rise in secondary and tourism sectors
2008-2011	Secondary sector (energy, mining processing)	Growth in manufacturing and services (due to industrial transfer from Pearl Delta area)
2012 to the present	Tertiary industry (ethnic-cultural tourism)	Consolidation of cultural tourism

Source: Based on Linnan Yearbook Compilation Committee (2000-2015), and present estimate.

Table 2*GDP Distribution of the Three Major Sectors in Liannan County, 2000-2015*

Year	Primary (%)	Secondary (%)	Tertiary (%)	Total (%)
2000	38	25	37	100
2005	34	35	31	100
2010	18	44	38	100
2015	16	32	52	100

Source: Compiled from *Qingyuan Statistical Yearbook* and Liannan Memorabilia (http://www.liannan.gov.cn/Category_17/Index.aspx)

With the active help of the government in shifting into non-traditional agriculture investments, mining and exploitation of local energy resources, the secondary sector has grown substantially. By exploiting Liannan's tourism potentials and natural beauty, ethnic-based tourism has taken off, giving a shot in Liannan county's GDP development. It is worth noting that as a result of the international economic tsunami which erupted in 2008 and impacted the manufacturing industries in Pearl River Delta, the industrial delta was forced to go for an upgrading transformation. This transformation had resulted in a transfer of more labour-intensive industries from the delta to the less developed Liannan. With the setting up of the Guangdong National Industrial Park in Liannan which moreover is endowed with rich mineral deposits such as non-ferrous metals, and hydro-electric power supply, the county and the local enterprises have benefited a great deal. The transfer also saw a number of local environmentally unfriendly factories being closed down or upgraded to a higher standard.

Indeed, around 2010, Liannan Yao Autonomous County was listed as a key ecological functional area. Capitalising on its natural scenic landscape, Liannan's tourism has developed significantly. As the major player in the local service industry, tourism contributed to the tertiary sector a revenue of 160.29 million yuan in 2000, to over 1.9 billion yuan in 2015, a dramatic increase of nearly 12 times with an average annual growth of 18% during the 15-year period (Linnan Yearbook Compilation Committee (2000-2015). At present, Liannan has set a goal of expanding the tourism industry by focusing on its most scenic spots. With its unique and rich ethnic customs and artistic tradition, Liannan is in a good position to attracting both domestic and international tourists to visit its rare Baiyao tourism resource.

Liannan's ethnic Yao minority-style tourism could be organised in many aspects, and this can be developed in the three following ways. First, the "Yao Style" is featured in hundreds of Yao

villages, rich in their cultural heritage, such as “Pai Taking”, “Yao music hall” as well as many other kinds of festivals associated with singing, music, food and other traditional festivals.

Second, Liannan tourism can work with Hunan and Guangxi tourism agencies to form a joint Guangdong, Hunan and Guangxi tourism circle. They can together build collaboratively tourist and leisure resorts for tourists from surrounding provinces and cities such as the Pearl River Delta, Hong Kong, Macao and other places.

Third, this jointly developed tourism economy, with the help of the government, can expand its respective business chains and networks. This will contribute towards the promotion of services such as catering, hotels, transportation, real estate, finance, wholesale and retail, and cultural services, hence creating more possibilities through their co-ordinated development and efforts in the industry.

In the area of private enterprises, their economic role has dramatically surged from 2000 to the present day. As shown in Table 3, the involvement of private enterprises was most significant in local mining and hydro-electric power investments after 2000. After 2012, tourism has turned up to be their key business interest.

Table 3

Economic Role of Private Enterprises in Liannan from 2000 to the Present

Time Period	Total No. of Private Enterprises	No. in Agriculture, Forestry & Animal Husbandry	Proportion of Total (%)	No. in Mining, Hydro-electric Power	Proportion of Total (%)	No. in Tourism, Hotel, Catering & Cultural Entertainment	Proportion of Total (%)	Others	Proportion of Total (%)
By 2000	21	0	0	3	14	1	5	17	81
2000-2007	109	3	3	49	45	10	9	47	43
2008-2011	153	9	6	37	24	10	7	97	63
2012 till present	406	93	23	41	10	123	30	149	37

Source: National Enterprise Credit Information Publicity System. Various years

Economic Restructuring and the Practice of Paternal Support

The previous section demonstrates that Liannan's traditional economic structure has been transformed during the first 20 years of the new millennium to become much less dependent on subsistence agriculture. Much credit is attributed to the "umbrella support" of the government whose "paternal protective measures" have enabled state-owned enterprises to perform and lead other joint venture and private businesses to observe policy guidelines. State enterprises playing such a leading role, for example, are given below (NECIPS, Various years):

- Primary industry: Liannan Yao Autonomous County Yao Shan Special Agricultural Development Co., Ltd., jointly funded by Liannan County Public Assets Management Centre and China IFAD key Construction Fund Co., Ltd.;
- Secondary industry: Liannan Lushui Water Conservancy Co., Ltd., jointly funded by Liannan County Water Conservancy Bureau and Liannan County Water Conservancy Bureau Trade Union Committee; and
- Tertiary industry: Liannan Yao Autonomous County Yuling Gupai Tourism Investment and Development Co., Ltd., funded by Liannan County Public Assets Management Centre).

Table 4 shows there were 32 state-owned enterprises in energy resource exploitation, iron and steel as well as the utilities (water and electricity), and the construction sector. This situation was in line with Liannan's plan to actively develop tourism and other industries including heavy chemical industry in preparation for a take-off and to end its widespread poverty.

In so doing, the local Liannan government has first of all improved its basic infrastructure to strengthen its contact with the outside world, and has taken advantage of state-sponsored preferential policies to attract investments from external sources. Consequently, from 2000 to 2007, many state-owned enterprises such as Qingyuan Telecom Industrial Co., Ltd., Guangdong Tobacco, China Life Insurance Co., Ltd., among others, set up branches in Liannan County.

In the "Double Transfer" programme, not only manufacturing corporations were attracted from the Pearl River Delta area, but water and electricity supply, as well as other natural resources were developed to support Liannan's economic restructuring activities. Following the shutting down of some local economically unviable cottage workshops, ethnic cultural tourism was put in place as a dynamic sector to provide jobs.

Table 4*State-owned Enterprises in Liannan Yao Autonomous County, 2000 to the Present*

Time Period	State-owned enterprises	Main sectors/types	Leading industries
By 2000	32	Energy, hydro-power, metals	Primary industry
2000-2007	12	Hydro-power and energy resources	All primary, secondary and tertiary industries were basically close
2008-2011	4	No obvious features	Energy, mining
2012 to date	16	Tourism (ethnic culture), selected agriculture and trade	Cultural tourism

Source: National Enterprise Credit Information Publicity System. Various years.

The wholly state-owned Liannan Yao Autonomous County Public Assets Management Co., Ltd. is taken to illustrate its management role in helping advance the local restructuring activities. This corporation was established in 2006 with a registered capital of 20 million yuan whose main responsibility was for the management and operations of public assets in Liannan. The 16 holdings under its jurisdiction which were created between 2012 and 2017 included public buildings construction, transportation, industrial project development and other investments such as marketing of agricultural and herbal medicinal products and real estate development (NECIPS, various years). After being listed as a key ecological function area, Liannan went on to identify ethnic Yao cultural tourism as the leading sector. At the same time, other business activities like organic farming, Yao handicrafts, rural e-commerce, catering, hotel accommodation were also actively promoted.

Among the 16 holdings, the Yao Shan Special Agricultural Development Company Limited may be used to showcase its role and performance. This corporation started with a registered capital of one million yuan, jointly funded by the County Public Asset Management Centre and China Agricultural Development Key Construction Fund Co., Ltd. The key task of this company was to establish a channel to promote information exchange between “market” and “peasant households” so as to facilitate and guide farm production and marketing. There were difficulties in marketing Liannan’s agricultural products as the peasant households had not been able to bring up the quality and build up a brand name for their products, resulting in low added values in market sales.

As soon as Liannan was officially identified as a key ecological functional area, the Liannan

government placed emphasis on developing its organic agricultural products. One of the measures was to develop high quality tea in the uplands of Liannan. During the promotion, local Liannan government introduced a number of planting subsidy programmes such as “Liannan Yao Autonomous County Tea planting subsidy plan”, “Liannan Yao Autonomous County tea planting award”, which offered investment companies and individual farmers direct or indirect subsidies. In land allocation, under Liannan county’s “nine mountains half water half field,” a number of famous tea gardens were prepared for planters to apply. To help cultivators learn about growing tea, a tea garden demonstration base was also set up (*Nanfāng Daily*, 2021).

Under the paternistic style management of Liannan Yao Autonomous County Yao Shan Special Agricultural Development Co., Ltd., a famous tea “Dangui Tea” has become a branded product known in the region. Dangui Tea won the “Silver Prize of Black Tea” and the “Excellent Prize of Green Tea” in the “Guangdong Teacup” competition organised by Guangdong Tea Association in 2019 (Guangdong Tea Association, 2021). This brand of tea is now on sale in the Pearl River Delta and other regions in China.

To sum up, the “paternal protection” umbrella structure in ethnic areas has played a leading role in bolstering local economic performance. Table 4 shows how the “umbrella” state-owned enterprises in hydropower, mining and construction were used as an initiator to pave the pathway to facilitate access of other joint venture and private enterprises. It must be noted that state-sponsored preferential policies were also implemented to attract investments, many of which were large state-owned enterprises with rich operating experience.

Finally, after Liannan was listed as a key ecological functional area, a series of state-owned Yao culture-based firms began to embark on tourism and organic farming businesses. To enable all these economic restructuring, the Yao Shan Special Agricultural Development Co., Ltd’s management and coordinating efforts and support were crucial. This state agency has provided a series of incentives and land plots to motivate and attract private enterprises including foreign investors, workers and professional personnel to come forward to build a new and dynamic Liannan county.

Joint Venture Enterprises under Economic Restructuring

Joint venture enterprises are also known as those under “kinship protection” in the umbrella structure set up between public administrative departments and private enterprises or persons. There are only two large joint ventures in Liannan County that collaborate with outside investors. One is between Liannan Yao Autonomous County Ethnic Transportation Co., Ltd. and foreign enterprises, set up in 1999; and the other is Liannan Water Conservancy Co., Ltd. with private investment participation and initiated in 2008.

There are smaller joint ventures established between the County's administrative departments and local residents, with the purpose of promoting commodity production and the development of the rural co-operative economy and to guide grass roots co-operatives to undertake diversified business activities including marketing. There are six such enterprises, and they are as follows:

- a) Liannan Yao Autonomous County Supply and Marketing Society Regeneration Resources Recycling Co., Ltd (2009);
- b) Liannan Yao Autonomous County Lianfeng Metal Materials Co., Ltd. (2004);
- c) Liannan Yao Autonomous County Shuanglian scrap Metal Recycling Co., Ltd. (2011);
- d) Liannan Yao Autonomous County Agricultural Ecological Farmers Professional Cooperative (2011);
- e) Liannan Yao Autonomous County Nanling Green products Agriculture Co., Ltd. (2017); and
- f) Liannan Yao Autonomous County Xinnan Commercial Trade Co., Ltd. (2017).

The rice-fish project is a good joint venture case run by the cooperative in Liannan. With the support of the county government which is the key organizer of the yearly held "rice fish culture festival", the fish project is integrated with tourism. During the yearly festival, tourists are invited to catch, buy and cook fish on the spot. In addition, more than 1000 *mu*¹ of organic rice is also grown alongside the rice-fish project to provide it with an added value. Good market demand for organic rice has enabled over 100 cooperative households to earn a much higher income than their peers who cultivate just ordinary rice.

Today, the "Rice fish culture festival" has become a national demonstration fishery culture festival, highly regarded by Guangdong Provincial Agriculture Department, Culture and Tourism department and the Qingyuan City People's Government. Its activities have been also publicised by Guangdong's city culture radio, film and television tourism sports bureau, and the south Yao autonomous county people's government.

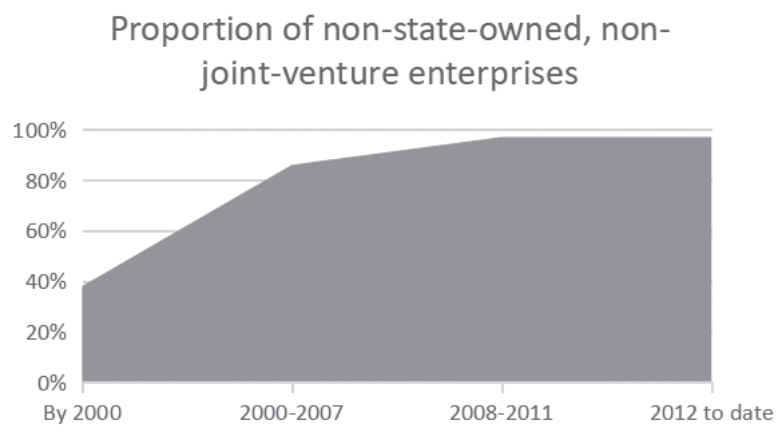
Private Enterprises under Economic Restructuring

"Friendly protection" measures are extended to private enterprises set up by individual persons. Ethnic areas that lag behind in development generally receive more financial support than other regions. Several key domains are identified to help private enterprises with subsidies, training, and other support. These domains include farming, forest products, livestock and aquaculture private investments in the development of mining and hydro-electric power; and the promotion of cultural tourism and supporting services such as food catering and hotel accommodation. With respect to tourism, the local government, in conjunction with tourism research institutions and private-

run tourism agencies, has drawn up *The Master Plan for Tourism Development in Liannan Yao Autonomous County, Guangdong Province (2012-2020)*, outlining preferential measures to support locally identified tourist attractions.

Response from private investors has been overwhelming during the last 20 years. Figure 1 shows that the proportion of private enterprises increased from 38% out of all enterprises in 2000 to 86% in 2007, and has remained stable at about 97% since then. Private enterprises now contribute about 45% of the total output in the mining and hydropower sectors (NECIPS, various years).

Figure 1



Source: National Enterprise Credit Information Publicity System, various years.

In the tourism industry, privately-owned companies have been dominant in both number and revenue. From 2017 to 2019, Guangdong Yao Culture Hotel at Liannan county was designated as the official meeting venue for important government meetings where strategic plans were formulated and implemented. Officials and business representatives would critically review and analyse these plans on the spot and to work out practical response strategies.

Conclusion

This study examines the three typical functions of the “umbrella society” in Liannan Yao Autonomous County. A problem that has persisted is the number of enterprises operated by the government and private capital and the diversity of enterprises is relatively small. In general, the leadership and financial support provided by the government under the “umbrella strategy” has been effective in the transformation process. The co-operatives which allow farmers a good extent

of autonomy and management involvement provide an excellent channel in the marketing of farm products and to raise farmers' incomes. However, despite the fact that Liannan was declared a Key Ecological Functional Area, a number of private enterprises are still engaged in extractive industries that pollute the environment. These industries are an important pillar for revenue generation. The challenge is how control and restrict the operation of the mining industry and the hydropower sector in order to minimise the damage to the environment.

The experience of economic restructuring in Liannan County has shown evidence of success leading to obvious shifts from the traditional small-scale farming towards the more productive secondary and tertiary sectors. Through government and private sector investments, the allocation of public and private resources to the Yao ethnic areas has witnessed substantive social and economic changes and ultimately directly contributing to the alleviation of poverty of the people.

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Notes

- 1 A *mu* is a unit of measurement that is equivalent to 666.7 square metres.