Unveiling the Multi-dimensional Risks of Returning to Poverty: Insights from the Transformation of China's Poverty Alleviation Policies

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Abstract

The eradication of absolute poverty in China by 2020 marked a significant milestone, yet ensuring sustained prosperity remains a critical challenge in the country’s rural revitalization agenda (2021–2050). This study indicates that individuals escaping poverty confront multifaceted risks of returning, shedding light on the unintended consequences of policy transformation in poverty alleviation. County G in Y Province, chosen for its representativeness and diversity of challenges, served as the study site. Inductive content analysis, involving 25 participants through in-depth interviews, was utilized for data analysis. A semi-structured interview guide, unanimously agreed upon by researchers, facilitated discussions on the risks of returning to poverty before and after the implementation of poverty alleviation policies. This study identifies and categorizes multidimensional risks linked to poverty-returning, encompassing general risks predating poverty alleviation initiatives and policy-induced risks from shifts in poverty alleviation measures. Findings deepen our understanding of these risks, highlighting general risks such as natural disasters, resource scarcity, and limited social support, as well as the policy-induced risks due to shifts in strategies that have led to decreased support for rural areas. The research underscores the inherent instability of policy transitions in anti-poverty efforts and calls for policymakers to address this vulnerability by crafting more sustainable poverty reduction strategies.

1. Introduction

Poverty remains a pervasive issue across human society, posing a ubiquitous challenge globally. China has always been a strong promoter of poverty reduction and has made significant contributions to poverty reduction in the world. Through continuous efforts, the final 98.99 million impoverished rural residents in China had all been lifted out of poverty, and all 832 impoverished counties and 128,000 villages had been removed from the poverty list by the end of 2020, accounting for more than 70 percent of the global total over the same period according to the World Bank’s international poverty standard[1].

The success of China’s poverty alleviation benefited from a series of policies and institutional reforms[2]. Hence, it is important to systematically review China’s anti-poverty policies, institutional reforms and mechanism innovations[3]. China’s primary focus in eradicating poverty has been on its rural areas. Since the establishment of the state in 1949, China’s endeavors in poverty alleviation can be delineated into six distinct phases. The first phase (1949-1978) was the genesis of China’s large-scale poverty reduction, and through land reform, the socialist transformation of agriculture, and the large-scale construction of rural infrastructure and the provision of public goods (mainly education, health care, and social security), a good foundation was laid for subsequent poverty reduction. In the second phase (1978-1985), China entered a phase of change from a planned economy to a socialist market economy system, and the implementation of the household responsibility contracting system greatly increased farmers’ motivation to produce, and farmers’ incomes improved significantly. In the third phase (1986-1993), the Chinese Government established the State Council Leading Group on Poverty Alleviation and Development, and formally began to implement organized, planned and large-scale rural poverty alleviation and development. In the fourth phase (1994-2000), China formulated its first national strategy for poverty alleviation and development, which designated 592 national-level poverty-stricken counties with a population of 80 million poor people; this period saw the concentration of manpower, material and financial resources, and seven years were devoted to solving the absolute poverty of these 80 million people, hence the name of this plan, the "Eighty-Seventh Poverty Alleviation Plan". In the fifth phase
China formulated its first 10-year plan for advancing the cause of poverty alleviation, the Outline of Poverty Alleviation and Development in China's Rural Areas (2001-2010), which proposed the implementation of a village-level targeting mechanism, implying that the unit of poverty alleviation and development had shifted from the poor counties to the poor villages. In the sixth phase (2012-2020), the introduction of targeted poverty alleviation policies marked a revolutionary shift in methods. China has learned from international experience, fully considered its actual conditions, and launched a series of guidelines and measures to increase efficiency, summarized as accomplishing “Targeted Efforts in Six Areas” (This refers to efforts to identify the poor accurately, arrange targeted programs, utilize capital efficiently, take household-based measures, dispatch first Party secretaries based on village conditions, and achieve the set goals.) and “Five Measures for Poverty Eradication” (The measures include: boosting the economy to provide more job opportunities, relocating poor people from inhospitable areas, compensating for economic losses associated with reducing ecological damage, improving education in impoverished areas, and providing subsistence allowances for those unable to shake off poverty through their own efforts alone.) By the close of 2020, China achieved a monumental milestone with the removal of all impoverished counties from its official listings, thereby addressing the issue of absolute poverty among its underprivileged populations.

Consolidating the results of poverty eradication and effectively linking rural revitalization are important elements of China's social policy. The current gains out of poverty are not secure and face a high risk of returning to poverty[4]. Disregarding the emerging poor population resultant from the upward revision of the poverty threshold, a more pressing reality pertains to the relapse into poverty among those previously emancipated from destitution. Recent years have witnessed a yearly returning to poverty among rural population, with 600,000 people in 2016 and 200,000 in 2017, and 2 million people who had escaped from poverty at risks of potentially returning to poverty by the end of 2019 (Poverty Alleviation Office of the State Council, 2020). Indeed, a segment of the population teeters on the brink of the poverty line, with their income levels precariously aligned with the established poverty criteria[5]. If there is a situation where rigid expenditure is too high or income shrinks significantly, they can easily become poor again.

China's achievements in poverty reduction stem not only from sustained rapid economic growth but also from the implementation of extensive, enduring government-led strategies for poverty alleviation[2]. Hence, the transformation of China's poverty alleviation policies is also an important factor inducing the risks of returning to poverty. China's practice of large-scale poverty reduction has evolved from being driven by reforms of the rural economic system to being driven by poverty alleviation and development in key regions, and then through village-wide poverty alleviation to being driven by targeted poverty alleviation policies[6]. Poverty alleviation policies at different stages are characterized by different features, and with the eradication of absolute poverty, the next stage of poverty alleviation policies will also undergo a shift in terms of basic objectives and modes of implementation[7]. In the “Guiding Opinions on Comprehensively Advancing Rural Vitalization and Accelerating the Modernization of Agriculture and Rural Areas (2021)” issued by the State Council of China, it proposes to set up a five-year transition period for counties that have escaped from poverty, so as to gradually achieve a smooth transition of poverty alleviation resources from focusing on support for impoverished households to comprehensively promoting rural revitalization. This implies changes in existing poverty reduction policies, including measures such as withdrawing resident teams and reallocating significant resources for poverty reduction. These changes will impact the outcomes of poverty reduction efforts and may lead to inefficiencies in project implementation. They could also affect the level of infrastructure development, social security, and
the provision of public services like education and healthcare in previously impoverished areas, potentially leading to a relapse into poverty.

Poverty returning poses a significant hurdle for China in solidifying its gains in poverty reduction, potentially impeding the sustained progress of poverty alleviation efforts and exacerbating the risk of cyclical impoverishment among rural households[8][9]. This study delves into critical facets of post-alleviation poverty dynamics: it categorizes and characterizes the risks of returning to poverty, scrutinizes the nuanced expressions of these risks, and evaluates the transformation in China's poverty alleviation policies subsequent to the eradication of absolute poverty, probing whether such shifts have engendered novel risks of poverty returning. The study further posits a suite of governmental interventions to mitigate these challenges. Through a systematic taxonomy of the multifaceted risks associated with poverty returning and an exposition of the unforeseen consequences arising from the transformation of state-led poverty reduction initiatives, this research aspires to deepen our understanding of the re-poverty phenomenon and to provide policymakers with actionable insights.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Risks of Returning to poverty

Poverty research has undergone a shift from static to dynamic. Static studies traditionally focus on defining poverty[10], identifying indicators[11], and measuring it[12][13]. Dynamic research integrates time into poverty measurement systems. The cyclical theory of poverty suggests poverty is inherently cyclical, leading households or regions to repeatedly fall into poverty[14]. Implicit in the study of poverty dynamics is an emphasis on the issue of poverty returning. Poverty returning entails a reversal from escaping poverty to falling back into it, demonstrated by individuals' income levels dropping below the poverty line standard after previously surpassing it[15]. According to China's national poverty identification criteria, poor households are primarily identified based on their income, with consideration given to housing, education level, and health status. Identified poor households create profiles in the National Poverty Alleviation Information System (NPAIS), serving as the primary data source for poverty alleviation efforts. Annually, adjustments are made to the poverty status of households based on national criteria. Continuous monitoring occurs for households lifted out of poverty, with a return to poverty recognized if their income falls below the poverty line for the current year. The risk of returning to poverty refers to the probability that the living standard of a family or individual who has been out of poverty will fall below the poverty line in the future because of the risk hitting, such as diseases, economic fluctuation, natural disasters and so on[16]. This phenomenon arises due to inherent vulnerabilities within previously impoverished households or incomplete elimination of the risk itself[17]. The risk scenarios associated with poverty returning are notably diverse and extend beyond merely low-incomes[18]. They emerge from the intricate interplay of various socioeconomic, environmental, and policy-related factors. Such complexities underscore the need to view poverty alleviation primarily as a governance challenge, requiring comprehensive strategies and coordinated efforts across different sectors of governance[19].

Reasons for returning to poverty include external factors, endogenous factors and a combination of both. Previous studies predominantly emphasized external factors, attributing a higher rate of poverty returning in certain areas to the severity of the natural environment and resource scarcity[2]. Conversely, the internal
perspective delves into personal capabilities and household assets[20]. Factors like insufficient personal capacity and limited household capital contribute to the heightened vulnerability of formerly impoverished groups[21].

Researchers have categorized the risks into two main types: exogenous risks, which are more sudden and unpredictable, such as those stemming from disasters[22]; and endogenous risks, which can be somewhat controlled[23], such as those arising from high cost of illness[24], marriage[25], or education[26]. Additionally, there are subdivisions such as policy-induced, capacity-related, environmental, and developmental factors contributing to a return to poverty. Furthermore, the risks of falling back into poverty can be categorized into five types: inter-generational transmission, occupational stagnation, social exclusion, economic shock, and ecological degradation. Additionally, there are subdivisions such as policy-induced, capacity-related, environmental, and developmental factors contributing to a return to poverty[27]; or into multidimensional constraints, such as welfare constraints, economic constraints and ecological constraints leading to poverty-returning[28]. Policy considerations in poverty alleviation have come under increasing scrutiny, with the absence of comprehensive and enduring follow-up measures, or the presence of biases in the implementation of poverty reduction strategies, posing indirect risks to the resilience of impoverished populations. Specifically, groups that heavily rely on industry-focused, consumption-driven, or relocation-based poverty alleviation programs are at a higher risk of susceptibility to policy-induced vulnerabilities[29]. This is because, without internal motivation and self-sufficiency, a family may relapse into poverty once external assistance is withdrawn, no matter the amount of initial support received[30].

Assessing the risks of poverty returning involves building indicators and applying evaluation methods. Researchers have developed indicator systems from diverse theoretical angles like sustainable livelihood capital[31], poverty vulnerability, multidimensional poverty recurrence[32], policy formulation and implementation[33], and comprehensive viewpoints[34]. With the rapid advancement of interdisciplinary methodologies like machine learning, efforts are being made to minimize human subjectivity in monitoring the risk of poverty returning, with researchers exploring the use of integrated learning algorithms for precise categorization of those risks[35].

2.2. The Transformation of China's Poverty Alleviation Policies

In China's economically challenged regions, agricultural production serves as the predominant economic activity. However, agriculture is inherently vulnerable to market fluctuations, seasonal changes, and the unpredictable natural disasters, leading to a precarious market for agricultural goods and consequently, unstable incomes for farmers. The infrastructure in these areas remains underdeveloped, and the delivery of public services is suboptimal. Individuals who have recently emerged from poverty face limited access to essential services, including education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and eldercare, which further compounds their risk of relapsing into poverty. Moreover, China's poverty alleviation efforts are confronted with the looming threats of external uncertainties. Global environmental security issues, climate change, and public health crises represent systemic risks that could undermine the gains made in poverty reduction and pose significant challenges to sustainable development and the long-term stability of impoverished communities[36].
The enduring of poverty alleviation policies is a reflection of the intricate dynamics of poverty itself. This implies that such policies are not one-off solutions; they do not culminate with China's 2020 proclamation of the eradication of absolute poverty. Despite rural impoverished populations having transcended the threshold of absolute poverty, they continue to grapple with a spectrum of risks that threaten to precipitate a relapse into poverty[37]. The shift in the path of China's poverty alleviation policy includes the following. In terms of policy objectives, the main focus will be on solving the problem of temporary and sudden poverty and long-term multidimensional relative poverty[38]. Regarding implementation strategies, the campaign-style poverty alleviation, which was previously fueled by a strong incentive model, is now deemed inapplicable. A new multi-actor participatory model of poverty alleviation has been instituted, reshaping the dynamic interplay between government, market, and society[39]. This paradigm shift will also entail an in-depth examination of the legal integration and synergy between the fundamental social security system and poverty alleviation policies, aiming to forge a cohesive and coherent policy framework[40]. In the realm of resource allocation, the evolution of poverty alleviation policy necessitates a strategic optimization of resource distribution patterns and addresses the persistent issue of campaign-driven poverty alleviation. The ephemeral influx of human and material resources witnessed in previous efforts is unsustainable for the long term, with various forms of resource investments encountering withdrawal and redistribution. These adjustments are poised to create a mismatch between the provision and demand for poverty alleviation support, necessitating a recalibration to ensure continuous and effective development interventions[41].

The extant literature on poverty returning predominantly identifies two groups at the forefront of this phenomenon: families that were previously impoverished and those teetering on the brink of the poverty line. The standard gauge for measuring this returning is the established poverty threshold. The underpinnings of such reversals frequently stem from inadequate access to vital resources, social capital, and a lack of inherent capabilities. A pivotal consensus among scholars posits that a return to poverty is intrinsically an impoverishment state, with the risk of returning being contingent on the confluence of internal and external factors that may trigger this resurgence of poverty[42]. The literature has strived to develop a cohesive analytical framework that integrates both the objective determinants of poverty returning, such as resource scarcity, recurrent disasters, and deficient public service infrastructure, with subjective elements like health deterioration, skill deficits, and conservative mindsets. The governance strategies to mitigate the risk of returning to poverty are anchored in a comprehensive approach that engages a diverse array of tools and stakeholders. However, a significant gap in research persists concerning the repercussions of China's evolving poverty alleviation policies on the likelihood of re-impoverishment. This study not only delves into the overarching risks of poverty returning but also scrutinizes the consequences of China's policy shifts in poverty reduction on this critical issue. By delving into the intricate layers of the multi-dimensional risks associated with a potential return to poverty, this study sheds light on the nuanced implications of China's dynamic policy transformations in the realm of poverty reduction. Through a robust analysis of the interplay between policy shifts and the complex landscape of poverty recurrence, this research offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities inherent in sustaining poverty alleviation efforts in China.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area
We selected County G of N Prefecture in Y Province as the study site. Our fieldwork was carried out in July-September 2019. County G is located in the southwestern border of China, in the middle reaches of the N River, and is a typical alpine and canyon terrain. County G has fewer arable land resources, and most of the residents grow Amomum tsaoko Crevost & Lem, tea and other cash crops mainly in the mountains. As of November 1, 2020, the resident population of County G was 114,372. County G is dominated by Lisu and Nu ethnic minorities, which make up 98% of the county’s total population. County G is an area with a high incidence of natural disasters such as mudslides and floods. Due to the harsh natural conditions and extremely difficult transportation, County G lacks local businesses and has very few employment opportunities for its residents, with most young people going to other cities to work.

County G used to be a deeply impoverished county in the "Three Regions and Three Prefectures", and was a key county in the national poverty alleviation and development work, with the incidence of poverty reaching 53.5% at its peak. Since the implementation of China's Precision Poverty Alleviation Policy, the government has supported poor people in G County to lift themselves out of poverty through industrial poverty alleviation, relocation poverty alleviation, and social security peddling poverty alleviation. In 2019, the per capita disposable income of urban permanent residents in County G increased by 8.3%; the per capita disposable income of rural permanent residents increased by 11.2%. On November 13, 2020, County G was approved by the People's Government of Province Y to withdraw from the sequence of poverty-stricken counties. 17,300 households and 73,100 documented poverty-stricken people were all lifted out of poverty and 57 poverty-stricken villages in County G were also lifted out of poverty.

3.2. Data Collection

Non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and government document review were used to collect data. We enhance the confidence of the analyzed information by increasing the diversity of sources. Non-participant observation was used to collect social contexts related to the research subjects for critical reflection[43], including the natural environment, transportation, housing situation, cultivation, local customs, rituals, and daily activities of local residents. We used semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide us with the greatest amount of information[44]. We selected 25 participants from households that had been lifted out of poverty and the duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. The characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (N = 25)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-40</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-60</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-80</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of family members (living together)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of family labourer</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sources of household income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>farming</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>part-time job</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A semi-structured interview guide (see Figure 1) was discussed in depth and agreed upon by an experienced interview team. The interview questions were closely linked to the objective of this study and based on the expertise of the interview team and their prior knowledge of the research topic [45]. In addition, questions were framed as open-ended and easily understandable, thereby allowing the participants to fully and freely share their viewpoints and experiences [46]. The interviewers organized and transcribed the audio content after the interviews. We collected and analyzed statistical yearbooks, working papers, and other documents related to poverty alleviation in County G to supplement the data from the fieldwork. Research credibility was improved by selecting and analyzing information from multiple sources.

Figure 1. The interview guide

3.3. Data Analysis
This study adopted an inductive thematic analytic approach to categorize and analyze the raw data. This technique is characterized by the systematic interpretation of text content that refers to a classification process of identifying and coding categories[47]. Specifically, the content of each interview was analyzed in accordance with the method described by Elo and Kyngäs (2014)[48], which consists of three phases (preparation, organizing, and reporting). In the preparation phase, the core tasks are “deciding on what to analyze in what detail” and “selecting the unit of analysis” [49]. According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004) [50], the unit of analysis can be words, sentences, or other syntactic-level units. In the current study, the sentence was selected as the unit of analysis.

Three steps were involved in the organizing phase. In the first step, two researchers read the texts and created open codes related to the research question of this study[51], such as “heavy rains triggered mudslides and landslides that buried wheat,” “no land to grow herbs,” “the treatment cost a lot of money and the family couldn't make ends meet,” etc. The code “Natural disasters destroy crops and farmers lose income” was created when many participants stated that mudslides, landslides, and pests destroyed the crops they planted. In the second step, the lists of open codes were grouped under subcategories[52]. “No land to grow herbs,” “The ecological environment is fragile, and many agricultural industries cannot be developed,” and “There are no technicians to guide planting and avoiding pests.” were categorized as the subcategory “Scarce resources and fragile environments.” In the third step, subcategories with content similarities were grouped as two categories[53]. For example, the subcategories “The strike of natural disasters” and “Scarce resources and fragile environments” were grouped into the category “general risks of returning to poverty” (see Table 2). Theoretical saturation of the study was reached when no new codes emerged.

Table 2. The Categories and Subcategories of Poverty-returning Risks Mentioned by Participants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The general risks of returning to poverty</td>
<td>The strike of natural disasters</td>
<td>Crops were destroyed by natural disasters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Houses were destroyed by floods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarce resources and fragile environments</td>
<td></td>
<td>No extra lands to grow herbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The ecological environment is fragile, making the development of many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>agricultural industries infeasible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of access to transportation makes it difficult to seek employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>outside the local area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of social support</td>
<td>Lack of formal government support, such as medical insurance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of informal support from social work and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>voluntary service agencies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Transformation related</td>
<td>Failure of Industrial Projects</td>
<td>We can only grow crops promoted by the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risks of Returning to Poverty</td>
<td></td>
<td>It's hard to sell what you grow without the help of government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependence on welfare-based policies</td>
<td>Fewer public service job opportunities in the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>village</td>
<td>Reduction in cash subsidies and subsistence grants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalization of anti-poverty policies</td>
<td>The resident officials who used to help me has left</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meetings on poverty alleviation have become less</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>frequent recently</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this study, we obtained informed consent from all participants to collect, analyze, and publish individual data and images. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the methods used, the potential risks and benefits, and how their data would be stored and used. Written informed consent was provided by the participants, and they were assured that their identities would remain anonymous in all publications resulting from the study. Any identifying information or images have been removed or altered to protect the privacy of the participants. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the ethics committee of the researcher's university.

4. Findings

This study found that the rural population faces multidimensional risks of returning to poverty, which can be categorized into two main groups: general risks and policy transformation-related risks. The general risks predate the government’s implementation of poverty alleviation policies and continue to exert long-term
impacts on impoverished rural areas. In contrast, the policy transformation-related risks arise directly or indirectly from the implementation and evolution of these poverty alleviation policies.

4.1. The General Risks of Returning to Poverty

4.1.1. The Strike of Natural Disasters

Natural disasters, including hydrological (floods, droughts, typhoons, etc.), geological (earthquakes, landslides, etc.), ecological (soil erosion, desertification, etc.), and biological (pestilences, diseases, etc.) events, pose significant risks for rural populations in China's impoverished regions, often leading to a relapse into poverty. The Programme for Poverty Alleviation and Development in Rural China (2011-2020) identifies the prevalence of such disasters as a principal barrier to poverty alleviation efforts in the country's targeted hardship areas. Our research site, County G, situated in the southwestern frontier of China, is characterized by the Nujiang River, which traverses the county from north to south, creating a complex "V"-shaped valley prone to landslides, mudslides, and pest outbreaks. The local adage, "No disaster, no year," reflects the inevitability of annual disasters, varying only in severity. Participant 3 said the following:

"Our terrain, with its high mountains and steep slopes, offers little arable land. We must cultivate Amomum tsako Crevost & Lem (a medicinal herb) in the mountains due to its preference for shade. However, heavy rains often lead to natural disasters such as flash floods and mudslides, resulting in meager harvests for the year."

The direct impact of natural disasters on the risk of returning to poverty is evident: sudden and unpredictable events like mudslides and pest infestations pose a direct threat to crop yields and cause substantial losses. The extended capital recovery cycle, low yields, and high labor demands of agriculture—the county's primary income source—significantly increase the likelihood of operators reverting to poverty in disaster-stricken years.

4.1.2. Scarce Resources and Fragile Environments

County G, nestled in a high mountain valley, not only suffers from a dearth of arable land but also lacks mineral resources, thereby limiting the county's economic development potential. Additionally, suboptimal transportation infrastructure impedes trade with neighboring regions. This resource scarcity hampers the attraction of investment, leading to an underdeveloped industrial and service sector and a homogenous economic structure. The scarcity of employment opportunities makes it challenging for the majority of County G's workforce to increase their income through local employment, prompting most young laborers to seek work in other cities and exacerbating the problem of "hollowing out." The lack of resources diminishes the potential for endogenous income growth, and in the event of an accident, the risk of reverting to poverty is heightened. Participant 11 shares the following experience:

"Due to my physical disability, I am confined to our village and unable to work in another city. The village offers few job opportunities, so farming is my only option. There are truly no other avenues for development here. This year, my wife fell ill, incurring significant medical expenses, and we slipped back into poverty."

4.1.3. Lack of Social Support
Social support, encompassing both material and emotional assistance, is provided by the government, community, social networks, and close relationships. It can be categorized as formal or informal based on its source. Formal support refers to the safety nets offered by the government or formal institutions, while informal support is based on natural bonds, social etiquette, and rituals, provided by family, relatives, and friends[54]. The absence of social support undermines the resilience of households that have emerged from poverty, leaving them vulnerable to the external shocks that can precipitate a return to poverty[55]. Rural impoverished individuals lack adequate support from both formal and informal channels.

For instance, illness is a leading cause of relapse into poverty, with over 42% of documented poor rural households affected[56]. Regarding formal support mechanisms, there exists a notable inverse relationship between the hospital's level and the medical expense reimbursement rate, with top-tier hospitals incurring the highest costs yet offering the lowest rates of reimbursement. Poor individuals facing severe and critical illnesses can only seek treatment at top-tier hospitals with advanced medical facilities, resulting in a heavy medical burden for them. Individuals who return to poverty due to illness often suffer from debilitating conditions such as cancer, cerebrovascular diseases, and chronic organ failure. These illnesses gradually deteriorate patients’ physical capabilities, often necessitating assistance with daily activities. In terms of informal support, the sick rely on sporadic help from their networks and neighbors to manage their day-to-day lives. In underprivileged areas, social work agencies and volunteer services are insufficient, and the role of social organizations in poverty alleviation is unclear. The support network for those who fall back into poverty due to illness is unsustainable, increasing their vulnerability to poverty. Participant 8 shares a personal account:

"I had heart surgery last year and cannot do farm work for long periods of time. My wife has passed away and my son goes out to work. During the busy farming season neighbours help to collect rapeseed from the field, but if it is too late to collect it, it has to rot in the ground."

4.2. Manifestations of Poverty Alleviation Policy Transformation

Campaign-style poverty alleviation—a strategy characterized by rapid, short-term improvements in living conditions and economic standards—entails the pooling of resources and mobilization of various stakeholders to enact strong policy measures within a defined period[57]. This approach, recognized as a temporary or transitional solution rather than a sustainable long-term strategy, has been an integral part of China’s comprehensive rural poverty alleviation model. With the eradication of absolute poverty, the focus of rural poverty governance in China has pivoted towards addressing relative poverty. This shift necessitates a transformation in the previous campaign-style model, which was marked by significant resource allocation. Policy actors, content, and the implementation process are all undergoing adjustments to align with this new focus (as depicted in figure 2).

Figure 2. Risks of Returning to Poverty Amid China’s Poverty Alleviation Policy Transformation

4.2.1. Policy Actors: Decreased Administrative Efficiency

Policy actors in a broad sense include various types of policy actors, such as political-administrative actors, social actors, target groups, beneficiaries, and others[58]. In this study, policy actors mainly refer to administrative actors, that is, those who formulate and implement policies. In China, the deployment of
resident teams is a long-standing and effective mechanism for decentralizing administrative authority to rural areas. This approach relies on administrative directives to station organizations with State authority in rural areas to manage public affairs such as poverty alleviation and development. The State Council’s Leading Group for Economic Development in Impoverished Areas first proposed and promoted the deployment of resident officials to impoverished villages in 1986. Resident work teams were extensively dispatched to these areas following the introduction of the Precision Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2013. Following this, the central government issued a series of policies and documents, including the “Implementation Plan for Establishing a Precision Poverty Reduction Work Mechanism (State Council Document No. [2014] 30)” and the “Guidance on Enhancing the Selection and Management of Resident Work Teams in Impoverished Villages(2017).” Consequently, village-based support has emerged as a crucial mechanism for precision poverty reduction. As of the end of 2020, 255,000 resident teams and more than 3 million officials had been dispatched as first secretaries and resident officials to poor villages, fighting on the front line of poverty alleviation alongside nearly 2 million township officials and millions of village officials, and had become an important team for implementing the targeted poverty alleviation policies, improving the organizational capacity of villages, and enhancing the people’s internal motivation for poverty alleviation and enrichment[59].

When comparing the implementation of poverty alleviation measures between villages that have been lifted out of poverty and those that have not, a conspicuous disparity emerges: villages still grappling with poverty typically host resident work teams, which have established supportive partnerships with these impoverished communities. In contrast, villages that have successfully emerged from poverty tend to lack such resident teams. Furthermore, in villages where poverty persists, the relationship between resident officials and impoverished households tends to be personalized, fostering an exceptionally close bond of support. The diligent efforts of these resident work teams, aided by state authority, significantly contribute to the progress in impoverished areas. However, once a village surpasses the poverty threshold, resident officials promptly withdraw, and the intensity of related policies tends to “cool down”. Participant 3’s interview reveals that, when the village overcame poverty, the resident work team left in less than a month. Resident officials’ visit to impoverished households have also decreased from “once a week” to “only twice a year”.

What prompts village-based resident officials to hastily vacate their positions? At a macro level, the underlying cause can be traced to the waning of state authority due to diminishing incentives within the administrative framework. In the context of poverty alleviation efforts in China, slogans such as “take off your official hat if you can't eradicate poverty” and "no promotion without poverty eradication" underscore an administrative incentive structure revolving around performance, advancement, and accountability. This performance-driven approach exerts a significant draining effect on administrative capacities across all levels: once policy objectives are met, administrative resources tend to swiftly shift towards areas where performance gains are more easily attained, leading to the sidelining of the original policy objectives. Consequently, after poverty reduction targets have been achieved in poor areas, state intervention in rural development has weakened, and administrative efficiency at all levels has been significantly reduced.

4.2.2. Policy Content: Reduced Resource Inputs

In the 1980s, China embarked on a systematic, large-scale initiative for rural poverty alleviation and development, establishing dedicated funds to bolster economic growth in underdeveloped regions. The cumulative total of these special poverty alleviation funds has reached nearly 1.6 trillion yuan, with the central
government contributing a substantial 660.1 billion yuan[60]. The reliance of state-designated poverty alleviation counties on fiscal transfers from higher-level governments is notably high, with an approximate dependency ratio of 85%. In some extreme cases, this reliance exceeds 90%, underscoring the pivotal role that financial assistance from upper-tier governments plays in mitigating poverty at the county level. Upon receipt of substantial fiscal transfers at the grassroots level, the primary allocation of these funds is directed towards the development of large-scale infrastructure and poverty alleviation initiatives. The residual resources are strategically invested in enhancing the livelihood assets of impoverished households through a variety of channels and programs. Beyond the direct financial aid from the government, a diverse array of societal forces and resources have been galvanized to support poverty alleviation endeavors. Corporations, public institutions, non-governmental organizations, mass organizations, and individual citizens alike have all made significant contributions to the crusade against poverty. The achievements of targeted poverty alleviation strategies are, to a great extent, a testament to the profound influence of these robust external actors.

Upon achieving the eradication of poverty, sustaining the elevated levels of investment previously directed towards impoverished regions may become increasingly difficult, resulting in a constriction of resource allocation. This trend is manifested through multiple indicators. Initially, the robustness of direct financial transfers is likely to diminish. While the funds earmarked for large-scale industrial poverty alleviation and infrastructure development are not expected to cease abruptly, there may be a discernible reduction in the vigor of supportive policies. Significantly, resources designated for the direct enhancement of livelihood assets may be progressively phased out in villages that have swiftly emerged from poverty. Secondly, there has been an observable decline in government engagement with industrial poverty alleviation projects. Many ongoing initiatives continue to depend heavily on state subsidies, "humane procurement,” and other non-market strategies to generate revenue, without having fully transitioned to market-driven operational models. The enhancement of market-oriented industry practices is essential for the sustainability of poverty reduction efforts. However, the diminishing role of government in public anti-poverty interventions has complicated the efficient allocation of resources through market mechanisms. Thirdly, the propensity and enthusiasm of societal actors to participate in poverty alleviation have waned. China's reliance on a "military order" style management approach and a campaign-style model during the precision poverty alleviation phase has been instrumental in maintaining high levels of commitment among diverse stakeholders. Yet, this distinctive governance strategy is not designed for long-term sustainability. The transformation of poverty alleviation policies is imperative, necessitating a shift from a campaign-style approach to one that is more robust and sustainable. This transition may entail the withdrawal and redistribution of substantial concentrated resources from impoverished areas.

4.2.3. Policy Implementation: Shift in Oriented Objects

Policy formulation is fundamentally anchored in the construction of shared meanings, with its progression often characterized by a contest for discursive legitimacy[61]. Within this framework, advocates for policy initiatives frequently engage in discursive competition to garner the backing of authoritative decision-makers. In the context of China's rural poverty alleviation policies, the designation of "impoverished village" serves as the pivotal discourse that galvanizes social opinion, economic resources, policy preferences, and administrative leverage. Since the prioritization of poverty alleviation within rural policy, these "impoverished villages" have been endowed with legitimate authority to draw in resources across various domains. Their de
facto economic hardship, coupled with subjective prioritization and administrative empowerment from the policy implementation standpoint, has positioned them as the focal point for policymakers to direct their policy investments. Once a village is stripped of the "impoverished" designation, it correspondingly loses the degree of policy focus and support it previously enjoyed. The policy compass then pivots towards other villages still grappling with poverty, or in some cases, the policy itself is discontinued. This redirection elucidates the paradoxical phenomenon where villages vie for the classification of "impoverished" to attract policy favor, and individuals compete for the status of "impoverished households" to garner targeted assistance.

In the wake of the successful poverty eradication efforts, a discernible reorientation of policy focus has emerged, marked by a diminution in the support mechanisms traditionally associated with poverty alleviation. This has been particularly evident in the phasing out of various public welfare positions. Industrial poverty alleviation, a cornerstone of China's targeted poverty alleviation strategy, predominantly targets households in poverty with the capacity and experience for self-reliant labor. For those marginalized groups encountering difficulties in the labor market, the government has historically provided transitional public employment opportunities, such as the outsourcing of public facility maintenance and management tasks within villages, complemented by subsidies to sustain their livelihoods. An ideal public employment policy would offer a comprehensive suite of services, ranging from job screening and skills training to job matching and continuous support. However, post-poverty eradication, the implementation of such policies has waned, presenting challenges for local poverty alleviation practitioners in establishing a sustainable and holistic public employment framework amidst constrained resources. Moreover, due to fiscal pressures on the government, the number of public employment positions has progressively decreased, with some roles being discontinued altogether. During an interview, Participant 19 expressed regret over the changes, noting that previously, the village was capable of providing public service employment for 50 individuals, which yielded higher incomes than agricultural work. Yet, with the retreat of government funding, the majority of these positions have been progressively phased out, reflecting a broader trend of retrenchment in public employment initiatives.

4.3. Policy Transformation-related Risks of Returning to Poverty

While the poverty alleviation policy in rural China has undergone changes in terms of the involved actors, policy content, and execution, the concept of path dependence reveals a critical issue. Households that have successfully lifted themselves out of poverty may find themselves unprepared to sustain their progress autonomously[62]. Consequently, when these households are no longer supported by the existing policies, there exist tangible risks of returning into poverty as a direct result of the transformations within the policy landscape.

4.3.1. Failure of Industrial Projects

Industrial poverty alleviation is an important part of China's practice of targeted poverty alleviation policies; since 2015, China has implemented more than 1 million industrial poverty alleviation industrials and constructed more than 300,000 industrial poverty alleviation bases of various types, with each poor county having a dominant industry with distinctive characteristics and a strong ability to bring poverty forward, and industrial poverty alleviation policies covering more than 98 per cent of poor households[63].
After successfully lifting out of poverty, villages may face a "policy vacuum", characterised by the withdrawal of administrative assistance. Through our survey, we found that industrial poverty alleviation programmes are basically controlled by administrative forces[64]. Project participants take advantage of the preferential policies for poverty alleviation to obtain production equipment, raw materials and start-up capital at very low or even near-zero costs, and ultimately sell the finished products at prices lower than the market average (or even lower than the price of the raw materials), and even if the products fail to meet the market demand or if the cooperative relationship with the enterprise breaks down, a large part of the project costs and losses will be passed on to the government. As a result, the industrial poverty alleviation will bring the agricultural products to the market as fast as possible and increase the income of the impoverished households. At the practical operational level, the selection of industrial projects is typically determined through collective research and discussion by the county government and external experts. Subsequently, feasibility assessments and the selection of seeds and land are conducted through field inspections by resident teams and external experts. In this process, impoverished households are not typically involved, thus positioning them outside of market risk through asset income poverty alleviation and other relief assistance.

The essence of the industrial poverty alleviation program lies in nurturing the intrinsic awareness and motivation of impoverished households, enabling them to grasp the intricacies of market transactions and operational norms. This process empowers them to evolve into proficient operators over time. "Operator consciousness" is a conceptual complex in which market participants integrate risk-bearing consciousness, product innovation consciousness, employment consciousness and creative reproduction consciousness[65]. In the industrial poverty alleviation model outlined above, poor households, as project participants, are relieved from concerns about production costs and investment sources. Additionally, they are granted access to sales channels. This arrangement, however, shields them from experiencing the tangible market risks and understanding supply and demand dynamics, which in turn makes it challenging for them to develop a sense of responsibility as operators and cultivate mature operational concepts. Without confronting the realities of market risks, poor households may struggle to fully comprehend the complexities of operating a business. This sheltered approach limits their ability to adapt to changing market conditions and hinders the development of their entrepreneurship skills.

Although this disguised relief project assistance mode is simple and easy to implement, and can concentrate funds to support the development of industrial projects in the short term and raise the nominal income of poor households as much as possible, with the shift of poverty alleviation policies and the withdrawal of manpower and other resources, there is a hidden danger of the sustainable development of industrial projects, and there is a certain risk of returning to poverty in the future for the farmers who rely on the industry to lift themselves out of poverty [66]. For industrial poverty alleviation projects, if the previously established project system operates well, has a strong risk-resistant ability, and is able to quickly realize profits, then project participants can obtain stable income from it and avoid the phenomenon of returning to poverty. If the project system is unstable and the operators are unable to withstand complex market risks, the likelihood of project participants who have profited from the previous project construction returning to poverty rises dramatically.

4.3.2. Welfare Dependency

The extensive rural infrastructure development has indeed resulted in significant improvements in transportation, water, and electricity conditions in villages. However, the impact of direct economic subsidies
and related services has been particularly pronounced among poor farmers. Interviews with resident officials and impoverished farmers have revealed a diverse array of resources for poverty alleviation. In addition to policy subsidies, these resources encompass cash, daily necessities like toothpaste and shampoo, food such as rice, flour, and oil, as well as production raw materials like seeds and saplings. Furthermore, sympathy services such as cultural and artistic performances are also provided. It's evident that the provision of resources is highly centralized, with higher-level departments regularly conducting poverty-alleviation activities in villages, often coinciding with holidays. This concentrated approach to resource distribution has left a lasting impact on the community, reflecting the multifaceted nature of poverty alleviation efforts in the region.

When examining the resources invested in poverty alleviation, a significant portion of these resources exhibit important characteristics of "welfare resources." These characteristics include the socialization of resource provision, individualization of the target audience, minimal conditions attached to accessing resources, and the direct nature of the benefits provided. The socialization of resource provision indicates that the resources are distributed collectively rather than on an individual basis, which can influence community dynamics and dependency on external assistance. The individualization of the target audience suggests that resources are tailored to the specific needs of each recipient, promoting inclusivity but potentially fostering a sense of entitlement or selectivity. The low conditions attached to acquiring resources may lead to a lack of accountability or long-term sustainability in utilizing the assistance provided. When individuals become accustomed to receiving benefits without meeting certain criteria or obligations, it can distort their perceptions of self-reliance and create dependence on external support. Furthermore, the direct benefits offered through these welfare resources can create a sense of reliance and entitlement that may persist even after the policies are no longer in place.

The intensive provision of financial and in-kind resources creates dependency and risks a return to poverty when withdrawn during policy transitions. This reliance, including cash and subsistence assets, leaves individuals vulnerable to negative impacts. The loss affects well-being and trust in poverty alleviation policies, especially for those who escaped poverty. Moreover, the significant resource provision through pro-poor policies has fostered a "welfare comparison" mentality among recipients, leading to discontent and entitlement among non-beneficiaries. This disparity can fuel rebellious behaviors and community tensions, complicating transitions and undermining policy impacts.

4.3.3. Policy Marginalization

Studies have noted that China's rural poverty alleviation policy lacks forward-looking strategies, as it primarily addresses existing or escalating problems rather than proactively intervening in the poverty alleviation process[67]. This approach fails to integrate poverty alleviation policies into institutionalized, law based social macro-policy changes. Consequently, rural poverty alleviation policies have remained in a state of low-level ad hoc, project-based management, making it challenging to adapt to new changes in post-poverty era dynamics. This approach is ultimately detrimental to the future governance of multidimensional relative poverty. This deficiency in foresight hinders the effective long-term impact of rural poverty alleviation efforts. By not incorporating preemptive measures into the policy framework, the system struggles to address evolving poverty challenges in a sustainable manner. The ongoing reliance on ad hoc approaches and project-based management limits the agility and responsiveness needed to navigate post-poverty era complexities. China's rural poverty alleviation policy has been gradually marginalized, making it difficult to interrupt the multi-
dimensional risks of returning to poverty and putting it at a disadvantage in achieving the goal of sustainable poverty reduction.

This underscores the need for strategies that not only help households escape poverty but also provide them with skills, resources, and resilience to withstand future policy changes. A truly sustainable poverty alleviation approach must empower these households to be self-sufficient and able to face challenges on their own. By creating an environment that supports ongoing growth and offering long-term support beyond immediate policy interventions, we can effectively break the cycle of poverty and ensure enduring enhancements in the well-being of rural communities in China.

5. Conclusion, Implications and Limitation

5.1. Main Findings

Following the landmark achievement of eradicating absolute poverty in rural China, the critical task of fortifying these gains, averting returns into poverty, and precluding new incidences of impoverishment has come to the fore. Key challenges persist, such as managing the complexity of poverty governance, addressing the large at-risk population, and tackling regional development disparities. Despite efforts, the risks of returning to poverty are still present in rural communities, exacerbated by enduring factors like natural disasters, resource scarcity, and major illnesses. China’s experience underscores that sustainable poverty reduction requires not only economic growth but also effective policy implementation and strong mobilization capabilities[68]. The country’s approach to poverty alleviation is marked by substantial incentives, stringent monitoring, and dynamic mobilization, ensuring that development efforts are well-coordinated and impactful[1]. However, when regions are no longer classified as impoverished, the shifts in poverty alleviation policies become apparent. These shifts are characterized by decreased administrative efficiency within policy implementation, a reduction in resources allocated to these areas, and changes in the oriented objects. During these transitions, individuals who have recently escaped poverty may encounter various risks associated with policy changes, such as the instability of income from poverty alleviation projects, a reliance on welfare policies that may become less supportive, and the potential marginalization of poverty alleviation initiatives. The current gains in poverty reduction are thus precarious, and preventing the poverty-returning risks, ensuring sustainable poverty alleviation, and effectively integrating rural revitalization strategies present new challenges for the Chinese government.

5.2. Policy Implication

The establishment of a comprehensive risk management system to prevent poverty-returning is imperative. Initially, a robust risk monitoring framework must be established to oversee ecological environments in areas recently freed from poverty, preemptively addressing the impact of natural disasters such as droughts and floods on agricultural productivity. This framework should also closely monitor the conditions of households that have recently emerged from poverty and those on the verge, with a focus on income stability, health status, and children’s education—key indicators that can signal potential relapse into poverty. Subsequently, implementing an agile emergency response system is crucial for bolstering the stockpile of poverty alleviation resources, thereby mitigating exposure to various risks and ensuring economic compensation in the event of risk realization. Lastly, as we transition into the post-poverty alleviation era, it is essential to expedite the
enactment of legislation that supports poverty alleviation initiatives. To maintain the prominence of these policies within the broader policy framework, a concerted effort is needed to reinforce and enshrine them in law, thereby establishing a solid and enduring legal foundation that guards against long-term risks of policy erosion or marginalization.

5.3. Limitations

This research conducts a focused case study on G County in Y Province, China, to explore the dynamic evolution of the rural poverty alleviation policies and the associated risks, which are under-researched in the current literature due to their distinctive features within the Chinese context. Our study acknowledges certain limitations; specifically, the analysis of the poverty returning risks and shifts in pro-poor policies is confined to the villages included in this study. Consequently, the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other communities remains uncertain. Moreover, the study's heavy reliance on qualitative data, particularly interviews, suggests that incorporating quantitative methods could have provided a more comprehensive assessment. To address these limitations in future research, we aim to develop a robust set of indicators for evaluating the risks of returning to poverty. This will not only enrich our understanding but also enable us to generalize our findings to a broader spectrum of rural communities across China.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Author Contribution

C.F. wrote conception, research design, data preparation, formal analysis, estimation, writing—manuscript draft. R.C. wrote data preparation, formal analysis, writing—review and editing. Q.M. wrote data preparation, formal analysis, writing—review and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to ongoing analysis for future publications, but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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