Targeted Poverty Alleviation in China Under Post-Development Theory: A Case Study of the Coffee Industry in Pu'er City

Zihao Chen [1]

[1]*(School of International Development and Cooperation, University of International Business and Economics, Beijing, China)*

ABSTRACT: *Poverty remains a persistent global challenge, requiring effective development pathways to address it. Post-development theory critiques Western-centric models for reinforcing power imbalances and ignoring local contexts, advocating instead for localized, participatory, and inclusive approaches. However, it has been criticized for its lack of actionable solutions. China's targeted poverty alleviation strategy provides a practical response to these limitations. Through localized, diverse, and participatory methods, China effectively utilizes natural and cultural resources to reduce poverty while promoting ecological sustainability. A notable example is the coffee industry in Pu'er City, Yunnan Province, which integrates traditional agricultural knowledge with modern practices. This approach embodies post-development principles by balancing economic growth with environmental protection. Using Pu'er's coffee industry as a case study, this paper demonstrates how China's targeted poverty alleviation transcends post-development's theoretical limitations, offering "Chinese wisdom" to global discussions on sustainable and inclusive development .*

KEYWORDS - *Coffee Industry Development, Post-development Theory, Pu'er City, Targeted Poverty Alleviation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Poverty remains one of the most persistent challenges in human society. Accompanied by hunger, disease, and social conflict, it threatens human survival and development while obstructing global aspirations for a better life. As the world's most populous developing country, China's poverty alleviation efforts have drawn significant global attention for their extraordinary achievements. Despite facing widespread poverty, deep-rooted socioeconomic issues, and immense governance challenges, China announced the complete eradication of absolute poverty in 2020. This accomplishment represents not only a major milestone in China's development history but also provides valuable insights and models for global poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

However, China's poverty alleviation practices transcend being merely a socioeconomic undertaking, they also represent an exploration and redefinition of traditional development paradigms. Conventional development approaches, often rooted in Western modernization theories, rely heavily on top-down, standardized solutions that frequently fail to address local needs and contexts effectively. In the 1990s, post-development theory emerged as a critique of these Western-centric models, arguing that development often reinforces global power imbalances while neglecting the value of local knowledge and participatory practices[1-2]. Post-development scholars have called for "alternatives to development", rejecting Western-led modernization, but they have not succeeded in presenting concrete "post-development" strategies[3]. This theoretical gap opens the door for explorations from non-Western contexts.

China's targeted poverty alleviation strategy offers a compelling example of such an "alternative to development". Moving beyond traditional top-down approaches, China emphasizes localized, diverse, and participatory methods[4]. A notable case is the coffee industry in Pu'er City, Yunnan Province. By leveraging the region's favorable natural conditions and integrating traditional agricultural knowledge, Pu'er's coffee industry demonstrates a sustainable approach to poverty alleviation that balances economic development with environmental protection. This localized, diverse development model illustrates how China has transcended Western-centric development narratives while embodying the principles of post-development theory in practice.

Post-development theory critiques the limitations of conventional development and advocates for bottom-up, inclusive strategies that prioritize local agency and address power imbalances[5]. Similarly, China's poverty alleviation initiatives have employed industrial, educational, and environmental measures, demonstrating a more nuanced and flexible approach to poverty reduction[6-7]. These practices align closely with the post-development critique of modernization and provide a practical framework for exploring development alternatives.

This paper uses the case of Pu'er City's coffee industry under China's targeted poverty alleviation strategy to analyze how localized practices can contribute to poverty eradication and ecological sustainability. This case demonstrates a pathway that diverges from traditional development paradigms, showcasing China's innovative approach to development. It also provides valuable insights for countries and regions seeking independent, locally driven solutions to poverty and development challenges. China's experience not only contributes to sustainable and inclusive development but also underscores its significance on a global scale.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Overview of Post-development Theory

Post-development theory emerged in the 1990s as a critical response to traditional development theories, such as modernization theory and dependency theory. During a time when Western modernization models increasingly dominated the global development discourse, post-development theory drew upon Foucault's concept of discourse to critique and deconstruct the mechanisms through which Western development narratives were constructed, including their concretization, technicalization, and legitimization. This critique revealed the crisis of uniformity inherent in the global model of modernization.

Post-development theory argues that development models based on Western modernization experiences overlook the cultural, ecological, and social diversity of developing countries. This oversight has contributed to global inequalities and environmental degradation. However, post-development theory has been widely criticized for its failure to provide a systematic and universally applicable "post-development" plan. Moreover, the "alternatives to development" proposed by post-development scholars are often considered overly abstract and impractical for real-world application.

Despite these criticisms, post-development theory offers a unique perspective for rethinking traditional development models. While it provides valuable insights into the limitations and hegemonic nature of existing development paradigms, its practical implementation on a global scale remains constrained, particularly in terms of scalability and applicability.

2.2 The Integration of Post-development Theory and Targeted Poverty Alleviation

China's targeted poverty alleviation practices exhibit certain alignments with the principles of post-development theory. Specifically, the policy of "seeking truth from facts, tailoring measures to local conditions, and providing targeted guidance" emphasizes the utilization of local resources and conditions, which resonates strongly with the core tenets of post-development theory. Wolfgang Sachs, in The Development Dictionary, advocates for abandoning a singular, universal development paradigm, instead urging local societies to explore unique development pathways based on their specific needs and resources[8].

Yunnan Province's targeted poverty alleviation efforts exemplify this approach by designing poverty reduction measures that align with the region's natural resources, economic foundations, and cultural traditions. These localized strategies reflect a practical application of post-development theory's call for alternatives to development. By transforming the abstract concept of alternative to development into actionable policies,

Yunnan's targeted poverty alleviation provides a "Chinese alternative" to development, offering a tangible framework for implementing the principles of post-development theory.

III. THE PRACTICE OF COFFEE INDUSTRY POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN PU'ER CITY

3.1 Pu'er City: Geographic, Economic, and Social Context

Located in the southwestern part of Yunnan Province, Pu'er City is renowned for its unique natural conditions and abundant resources, earning it the titles of the "World's Tea Source" and "China's Coffee Capital". Despite the reputation, Pu'er has historically been one of the poorest regions in China. Among its 10 counties (or districts), nine are autonomous counties for ethnic minorities, and 14 ethnic groups are indigenous to the region, including five "directly transitioned ethnic groups" that moved directly from primitive or feudal serfdom societies into socialist society. These groups have experienced relatively delayed economic and social development. Out of the 10 counties, nine were once designated as poverty-stricken counties, with two classified as deeply impoverished. At one point, the poverty incidence rate in Pu'er reached as high as 30.4%, reflecting the severity of its widespread and regional poverty challenges. Additionally, four of the counties are located along the border, where the unique challenges of economic development in frontier regions further compound the city's struggles.

The topography of Pu'er is predominantly mountainous and hilly, with altitudes ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 meters above sea level. The city benefits from fertile soils, abundant rainfall, plentiful sunshine, and significant diurnal temperature variations, all of which create ideal conditions for cultivating high-quality agricultural products[9].

However, despite these natural advantages, Pu'er faces numerous constraints in its economic development[10]. In terms of value addition within the industrial chain, Pu'er has long relied on producing raw coffee beans, lacking the capacity for advanced processing and value-added production[11]. This reliance results in low added value for its raw coffee beans and limited market premiums. Regarding technical and managerial support, coffee cultivation in Pu'er suffers from outdated techniques, and farmers lack adequate support for pest control, soil improvement, and other critical aspects, leading to low yields and inconsistent quality.

Infrastructure and transportation also remain significant challenges for this mountainous city. Underdeveloped infrastructure and high transportation costs hinder economic efficiency. Additionally, inadequate quality control during transportation reduces the value of coffee products, further squeezing farmers' profit margins. From an economic perspective, Pu'er's heavy reliance on coffee cultivation as a single source of income limits its economic resilience. The lack of effective integration with other sectors, such as tourism and cultural industries, weakens the city's ability to diversify its economy and manage risks within its agricultural sector[12].

This combination of geographic, economic, and infrastructural challenges underscores the need for targeted interventions to address Pu'er's unique development constraints. By leveraging its natural and cultural strengths while addressing systemic bottlenecks, Pu'er can unlock its potential for sustainable economic growth and poverty alleviation.

3.2 The Integration of Targeted Poverty Alleviation and the Coffee Industry

In recent years, Pu'er City has explored a new path for targeted poverty alleviation by leveraging the development of the coffee industry. Supported by government policies, financial investments, and the establishment of a full industrial chain, this model has successfully integrated economic growth with poverty reduction efforts. It has also promoted the development of Pu'er's green economy, offering strong support for China's poverty alleviation initiatives.

The Pu'er municipal government has laid a solid foundation for the growth of the coffee industry through a series of supportive policies and funding initiatives. These efforts include infrastructure improvements, technological upgrades, and the transformation of coffee cultivation practices. With the implementation of various specialty coffee projects, the quality of Pu'er coffee has significantly improved, unlocking the market potential for "specialty coffee" and breaking free from the long-standing dependence on low-value raw bean exports.

In terms of building a comprehensive industrial chain, Pu'er has gradually established a "planting–processing–sales" development model. At the planting stage, the introduction of advanced technologies and

specialty coffee cultivation practices has effectively enhanced the quality of coffee beans. At the processing stage, the city has built 86 centralized processing plants for coffee cherries, established 56 SC-certified coffee enterprises, and developed 15 large-scale enterprises. These efforts in deep processing have increased the added value of coffee products, further driving local economic growth. In the sales stage, Pu'er has utilized innovative new retail models, such as intelligent self-service coffee machines, to distribute Yunnan coffee across China and international markets[13]. This approach has significantly expanded market coverage. Furthermore, the smart sales system ensures that 20% of the revenue from each cup of coffee is directly transferred to farmers, substantially increasing their incomes. Data shows that selling 1,600 to 3,300 cups of coffee is enough to lift one coffee farmer in Yunnan out of poverty.

Improvements in logistics and transportation infrastructure have also been crucial to the success of Pu'er's coffee industry-based poverty alleviation efforts. To address transportation challenges in mountainous areas, the government has invested heavily in infrastructure development over the past five years, reducing coffee bean transportation costs and enhancing logistics efficiency. This initiative has not only resolved quality control issues during transportation but also facilitated easier access to domestic and international markets for Pu'er coffee.

International cooperation and brand-building efforts have further opened global markets for Pu'er coffee. In 2019, Pu'er coffee earned high scores in international tastings, attracting attention from cupping experts in nine countries, including the United States and Germany. This success encouraged international coffee giants to establish production bases in Pu'er[14]. By integrating into global markets, Pu'er coffee has gradually gained prominence on the international stage, becoming a significant representative of Chinese coffee[15].

The coffee industry-based poverty alleviation model in Pu'er has delivered remarkable results, achieving large-scale poverty reduction while promoting both economic and ecological development. By 2020, the coffee industry had successfully lifted approximately 600,000 people out of poverty, a figure comparable to the entire population of Luxembourg. As of 2023, the total economic output of Pu'er's coffee industry reached 5.3 billion yuan, providing stable income sources for more than 200,000 coffee farmers. The success of the coffee industry has also driven the development of Pu'er's green economy, offering a dual pathway of "greening" and "prospering" for poverty alleviation in the region[16].

The experience of Pu'er City demonstrates the pivotal role of specialized industries in targeted poverty alleviation. Through policy guidance, technological support, and market-oriented operations, Pu'er has successfully established a strong brand for its coffee industry in domestic and international markets. This practice has reinvigorated the regional economy while offering valuable insights and successful models for global poverty alleviation efforts.

IV. ANALYSIS OF TARGETED POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN PU'ER CITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POST-DEVELOPMENT THEORY

4.1 Utilization of Local Resources

Post-development theory emphasizes that development should be grounded in the unique resources, culture, and knowledge systems of a locality, avoiding the blind replication of external models. Pu'er City, with its warm and humid climate, fertile soil, abundant sunlight, plentiful rainfall, and significant diurnal temperature variations, provides ideal conditions for cultivating Arabica coffee[17]. By fully leveraging these geographical and climatic advantages, Pu'er has designated coffee cultivation as a primary industry for poverty alleviation. Through the promotion of coffee varieties suited to the local ecological environment, the city has not only increased coffee yield and quality but also safeguarded its ecological environment.

In addition, Pu'er City integrates the traditional agricultural knowledge of its ethnic minorities with modern technology, creating a locally distinctive cultivation system. This approach has not only stimulated local economic development but also strengthened community cultural identity and sustainability. Consistent with the principles of post-development theory, this strategy demonstrates how local resources can be harnessed to achieve autonomous development, rooted in the unique characteristics of the region.

4.2 Diversity and Ecological Sustainability

In its efforts to promote the coffee industry, Pu'er City has not only focused on achieving short-term poverty alleviation goals but also placed a strong emphasis on the principles and practices of long-term sustainable development. As a key component of industry-driven poverty alleviation, the promotion of ecological coffee farms has become a notable highlight of Pu'er's targeted poverty alleviation efforts. Local governments and agricultural departments have encouraged farmers to adopt organic and forest-intercropping cultivation methods, reducing the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. This approach has improved the quality of coffee beans while protecting the region's fragile ecosystems, as demonstrated by successful forest conservation projects in Ximeng and Lancang counties.

This initiative has not only enhanced the competitiveness of Pu'er coffee in domestic and international markets but also provided a valuable case study for sustainable agriculture worldwide. The establishment of ecological coffee farms has balanced economic benefits with environmental preservation, achieving the dual goals of economic growth and environmental management.

Moreover, Pu'er City has actively promoted the diversification of industries based on the coffee sector to ensure the long-term effectiveness and stability of poverty alleviation efforts. Local governments and enterprises have invested substantial resources in extending the coffee industry's value chain, integrating coffee cultivation with tourism and cultural industries to create a distinct model of poverty alleviation. For instance, comprehensive development projects like Pu'er Coffee Manor offer coffee plantation tours and coffee-making experiences, attracting numerous domestic and international visitors[18]. These projects have not only provided farmers with additional income sources but also spurred the growth of related service industries, such as local dining, accommodations, and handicraft production.

By fostering a diversified industrial ecosystem, Pu'er City has broken free from the limitations of traditional, single-path agricultural development. The city has successfully built a multidimensional economic system that injects vitality into the local economy and ensures sustainable development. This integrated approach highlights the potential of leveraging local strengths to achieve economic growth, environmental sustainability, and poverty alleviation simultaneously.

4.3 Integration of Social Culture and Economic Development

Post-development theory emphasizes the value of cultural self-determination and diversity. In the case of Pu'er City, the coffee industry-based poverty alleviation efforts have effectively integrated social culture with economic development, leveraging local cultural heritage as a foundation. Particularly in ethnic minority areas, poverty alleviation practices have respected and preserved the diversity of traditional cultures, transforming cultural resources into drivers of economic growth. For example, local governments and enterprises have combined ethnic minority traditional festivals with coffee culture promotion, organizing events such as coffee festivals and coffee-picking experiences. These initiatives not only attract more tourists but also successfully promote local specialty brands[18]. By protecting cultural traditions while providing farmers with additional income sources, this approach enhances the cultural value-added component of local industries and strengthens their market competitiveness.

At the same time, Pu'er City has placed great emphasis on improving the skills and education of the local workforce, particularly focusing on capacity building among young laborers. The local government, in collaboration with vocational schools and enterprises, has introduced training programs on coffee cultivation, bean processing, and coffee brewing techniques. These initiatives equip local youth with advanced professional skills, providing high-quality human resources to support the growth of the coffee industry. Furthermore, these efforts have created more employment opportunities for young people, reducing population outflows and further stabilizing the achievements of poverty alleviation.

Through the deep integration of culture and economy, Pu'er City's coffee industry-based poverty alleviation has enhanced the overall competitiveness of the local economy while promoting the comprehensive development of the local society. This model provides an important example for other ethnic minority regions in China, showcasing how cultural preservation and economic development can work hand in hand to achieve sustainable poverty alleviation[19].

V.   CONCLUSIONS

Pu'er City's targeted poverty alleviation through the coffee industry demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating local resources, economic diversification, and cultural preservation into sustainable development strategies. The city has successfully transformed its natural and cultural advantages into drivers of poverty alleviation, fostering economic growth and ecological balance. By building a comprehensive industrial chain and promoting community participation, Pu'er has created a multidimensional and replicable development model.

Pu'er's experience not only aligns with the principles of post-development theory but also provides valuable lessons for regions worldwide seeking alternatives to development models that prioritize sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural identity. This case underscores the importance of context-sensitive approaches in addressing complex development challenges, offering a roadmap for sustainable poverty alleviation in diverse global contexts.

VI.   ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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