

# Goodbye Hardship

An ethnic minority in southwest China's mountainous area steps out of poverty By Yuan Yuan



An aerial view of Dulongjiang Township in Gongshan Dulong-Nu Autonomous County, southwest China's Yunnan Province, on April 18 (XINHUA)

**F**lanked by snow-capped mountains bordering Myanmar in southwest China's Yunnan Province, Dulongjiang Township, named after the Dulong River that winds through it, used to be one of the poorest areas in China. The township is home to people of the Derung ethnic group, one of the ethnic minorities in China that has the smallest population.

Before the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Derung people still lived an insulated and primitive life. It was not until 1999 that a road was built linking the area to the outside world, making it the last township in China to be connected by road. Access to the township was still blocked by snow for almost six months a year until a tunnel was completed in 2014.

Yunnan, which borders Myanmar, Laos and Viet Nam, has 25 ethnic minorities. The vast mountainous areas in the province have been identified as a major target for the government's poverty alleviation. One of the smallest and most isolated minorities, with less than

7,000 people, the Derung ethnic group shook off poverty in 2018.

## Paving the way

"The life of the Derung people in recent years has changed dramatically," said Gao, 65, former head of Dulongjiang Township, a key figure in leading local people out of poverty.

After graduating from a normal school in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, Gao returned to his hometown. In 1984, he started to serve in the township government with the ambition of lifting the local people out of poverty.

By then, there were no roads, no regular schools and no businesses in the township. The rolling hills and harsh climate made it difficult to even build a road. School-aged children would have to slide along a steel wire above the roaring Dulong River to get to county schools. Landslides, avalanches, wild animal attacks and traffic accidents made life extremely harsh.

Under such harsh conditions, Gao started to explore methods to increase local income.

He made ecological protection a top priority. "A well-preserved ecological environment is the great treasure passed down to us by our ancestors," Gao said. "We will spare no efforts to protect it."

Eventually, he found a way to bring both economic benefits to the locals and do no harm to the environment: They started planting amomum tsao-ko, a spice and medicinal herb, which is well-suited for the local climate.

Gao set up a base offering free training to the townspeople and in order to encourage more of them to learn the process, he also provided free accommodations and meals.

This created a sharp rise in locals' income. So far, there are more than 4,000 hectares of amomum tsao-ko farmland in Dulongjiang.

"The market for amomum tsao-ko has been growing in recent years, which has led to a boom in locals getting involved in the business," said Zhang Jun, Deputy Director of

the Publicity Department of Gongshan. "In addition, we have developed planting of paradis, another medical herb, and beekeeping, along with cow and chicken breeding, which have all greatly expanded locals' income sources."

Zhang said that in 2018, the average income of local people was 6,122 yuan (\$900), an increase of 23.5 percent from 2017. Amomum tsao-ko alone brought in 7.43 million yuan (\$1.09 million).

Furthermore, the forestry department in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, to which Dulongjiang is subordinated, has made all the people from 195 impoverished Derung households ecological rangers, providing them with an income for protecting the forests in their native land.

In the process, various levels of government support has offered a boost. In 2010, the provincial government implemented entire village advancement projects as well as pilot projects for the improvement of entire townships, with Dulongjiang included. Financial aid and related programs from the government put the town's development on a fast track.

## Promising future

As a result, Dulongjiang now has a brand new look. Many new houses have been erected along the road, as residents living in uninhabitable conditions have been relocated to new houses. The 4G network covers the entire township and is accessible to quite a few delivery service providers.

In the early 2000s, a school covering six years of elementary and three years of secondary education was set up in the township. Children don't have to slide along a wire to attend schools further away anymore.

Moreover, the improvement in transportation has brought tourists to the township, leading some local people to renovate their houses into restaurants and inns to increase their income.

Tang Xiaocong, a 28-year-old local, runs a restaurant with his wife in Maku Village of the township. Their average income each month is about 6,000 yuan (\$882).

"We were relocated three times before we settled down in Maku," Tang said. "The houses we lived in before were made of either bamboo or wood. They were freezing in winter and leaked when it rained. Our house now is built of bricks and is steady and firm with three bedrooms and a spacious kitchen."

Tang received his education outside Dulongjiang and served in the army for several years before returning to his hometown. These experiences broadened his horizons. In 2014, he came back to his village and opened up a restaurant.

"It has not been just the road and tunnel that have connected the township with the outside world," Tang said. "The 4G network has also linked it up. A growing number of locals

are selling their agricultural products on online business platforms."

Tang Jiajia, who also runs a restaurant in the township, is from Lijiang, a city in Yunnan. She followed relatives to Dulongjiang 11 years ago, seeking business opportunities.

She started as a food vendor with her mother, and although the business was not that profitable back then, Tang Jiajia chose to stay because the locals were all very nice people.

Shops in Dulongjiang enjoy a tax-free policy and rent is inexpensive. Thus, she decided to settle down in the township. Her business has since developed into a restaurant. "Now we can easily earn 100,000 yuan (\$14,700) a year," Tang Jiajia said. "With more tourists visiting in the future, we believe the business will get better."

## Rainbow weavers

Blanket weaving, a traditional handicraft of the Derung ethnic group, has also helped local people find a way out of poverty.

The original material for the blankets, featured with stripes of bright colors, was made from wild hemp. When people in the township were still living in primitive society before the founding of the PRC, these blankets are everything that they had—as clothes to cover their bodies during the day and as quilts at night to keep warm. Weaving blankets was what Derung women did in the evening after returning from farm work all day.

Jin Chunhua, a 34-year-old Derung weaver, learnt the weaving skill when she was 15 years old from her mother. She didn't expect the blankets she weaves can expose her to a much bigger world.

Sponsored by a project launched by the Beijing Contemporary Art Foundation to promote Derung blankets, Jin and another Derung woman have visited Shanghai and spent a month there every year since 2016, working with fashion designers from a domestic clothing company to create new blanket patterns and receive training on different weaving skills.

Before traveling to Shanghai, Jin's longest trip had been to the county seat. That was a three-hour trip by bus. During their time in the megacity, the two Derung women spent almost every day with the designers, receiving training and adjusting pattern designs and colors to cater to modern tastes. The weaving material was changed to wool and the colors, which were too bright according to the designers, were made duller and lighter.

They finally nailed down 10 pattern designs and after the two women returned home, they set up a cooperative and organized more Derung women to join the project, with 17 women joining in the first year. The weavers completed 58 Derung blankets from the new materials such as wool provided by the company, with each piece 45 cm wide and 8 meters long.

The company then made them into cushion covers, different size blankets and cloaks.



A Derung woman shows the blanket she weaves at home in Dulongjiang Township in Gongshan Dulong-Nu Autonomous County, southwest China's Yunnan Province, in December 2017 (COURTESY PHOTO)

The products hit stores in Shanghai and online shops and sold out in five months.

During the second year of the project, the team of weavers expanded to 24 and the order from the company increased to 120 pieces. Each piece earned the weaver 400 yuan (\$59). The average annual income for the Derung people was only 4,378 yuan (\$644) at the time. "A woman can weave nine pieces at most, which can earn her 3,600 yuan (\$530)," Jin said.

The weavers' creations were on display at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. The walls at the China Pavilion were decorated with Derung blankets.

"This project has helped us to tap the market potential in preserving and promoting Derung blankets," Xiao Songjun, a local official, told *Beijing Review*. "We are planning to set up an association for Derung blankets and explore more channels for unique handicrafts of Derung ethnic group." ■

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