

# Working in the Clouds

Assistance program creates miracle in southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region By Li Nan

Liang Nanyu, Deputy Mayor of Shuanghu County in southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region, which is also the highest county in the world, has the distinction of initiating several firsts in the past three years.

He made it possible for the county, with an average altitude of 5,000 meters above sea level, to have its first C-section operation, a medical record. He was the first to get local students enroll in free seats in schools in big cities. Also, he upgraded the local economy's pillar industry, ensuring greater income for impoverished residents.

The 39-year-old arrived in Shuanghu in July 2016 as part of a Central Government program to assist in the autonomous region's development. In 1994, the Central Government made a new policy to provide greater support for Tibet. Some developed provinces were asked to help specific cities and counties in Tibet under the partnership assistance program. Eight years later, 17 leading state-owned enterprises (SOEs) joined the program. The China National Petroleum Corp. (CNPC) was one of the team and Liang, one of its officials, was assigned to Shuanghu.

Shuanghu lies at the heart of the Changtang National Nature Reserve on the Tibetan Plateau, 700 km northwest of Lhasa, capital city of the autonomous region. Established in 2013, it is China's youngest county and is scarcely populated.

After his arrival, Liang suggested some changes to the assistance projects so that they would focus more on healthcare services, education and job-generating industries.

## World's highest C-section

With its inhospitable terrain and rarified air, Shuanghu is also known as the "dead zone." Local average life expectancy is 58 years, 10 years less than the regional average. "Locals suffer from widespread high-altitude illnesses and newborn deaths," Liang said.

Before Liang's arrival, there were no surgeons and no functional surgical equipment

in the local hospital. If a woman went into a difficult labor, she had to be taken to Nagqu, a bigger city 550 km away and nearly seven hours' journey.

From 2009, a medical team from the CNPC began to visit the county once a year to provide free medicine and treatment. But they addressed just short-term ailments, not major diseases. So Liang recommended that surgery be introduced.

The first operation was a C-section. "Many thought it was an impossible mission," Liang said. The preparation took 10 months. A team from the People's Hospital in Shuanghu was sent to the CNPC Central Hospital in Hebei Province in north China to receive training. New medical equipment for the operation such as respirators was also bought.

August 23, 2017, was a landmark day for both Shuanghu and Liang. At 19:30, an expectant mother was sent to the operation room. Liang, together with the patient's family, waited outside. "I felt more anxious than when my own baby was born eight years ago," he said.

At 20:33, a newborn's cries broke out and when the baby was brought out, all those waiting outside smiled in relief. The birth of this child set a record for C-section done at the highest altitude in medical history—4,962 meters.

Today, 28 doctors in Shuanghu are trained to do appendicitis operations. Changchub Drolma, head of the People's Hospital of Shuanghu, said the hospital now has more qualified staff and advanced machines, providing better services.

In the coming years, the aim is to ensure timely treatment for common diseases. Liang said, "If we cannot ensure people's health, we cannot achieve moderate prosperity in all respects."

## Boost for education

Children in the autonomous region enjoy 15 years of free education, when most other places in China have a nine-year compulsory education system. Still, the high school

enrollment rate in Shuanghu was less than 10 percent. Most parents, herdsmen by profession, didn't think education could give their children a promising future.

Though 21 provinces and cities outside Tibet offer free classes for meritorious Tibetan students, from 2013 to 2017, no student from Shuanghu made it to the free classes.

Then thanks to Liang's efforts, 25 students in Shuanghu were sent to study in Lhasa and Beijing for free. When the first batch of students was selected in 2017, their parents didn't turn up to watch the selection. Nobody cared whose child would be selected.

Then last year, three students passed the tests to enroll in the free Tibetan classes in other provinces and this time, it created a strong impact in Shuanghu. During the screening to select two students who would be sent to Lhasa, 12 parents came to oversee the process. "It was beyond my expectations. From showing little interest in education to monitoring the selection procedure, the local parents showed a pleasant change," Liang said.

## A game changer

Shuanghu is an impoverished county with 21.9 percent of the population living under the poverty line. "Our target is to eliminate poverty this year," Liang said.

While looking for industries that could provide a sustainable way out of poverty, he discovered the local brine shrimp egg industry. Some saltwater lakes in Shuanghu are home to the brine shrimp whose eggs are perfect for aquaculture. Since the 1990s, selling raw brine shrimp eggs has been the main source of Shuanghu's revenue and local residents' income. "It's the purse of Shuanghu," Liang said.

He planned to upgrade the industry. After a rigorous third-party scientific study and dozens of market surveys, his plan was first, to build a factory to process the eggs, which would fetch more profit; second, to produce a specialty food with the eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) present in



Liang Nanyu (left), Deputy Mayor of Shuanghu County in southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region, gives free traditional Chinese medicine to local residents in the county on January 3. The medicine was provided by the Beijing Yuruomu Charity Foundation



The first batch of Tibetan children from Shuanghu start their studies in Lhasa, capital city of southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region, on August 31, 2017, with free tuition and accommodation

the eggs, a fatty acid that can lower the risk of heart diseases and help regulate blood fat and sugar as well as prevent insomnia; finally, to develop a drug with the EPA.

Before 2015, most of Shuanghu's brine shrimp eggs were snapped up at a very low price by one businessman from a neighboring province. To end the monopoly, Liang organized two public tenders in 2017 and 2018, but both failed, allegedly due to the trader's interference.

But Liang didn't give up. "Selling the eggs is a key way to pull Shuanghu out of poverty. It's our duty to ensure a good price for local

residents," Liang said. He planned the third public tender in January 2019. At that time, the volume of imported brine shrimp eggs in China was large, resulting in the price of the processed product being halved. Liang was prepared for the worst. If the tender failed again, they would outsource the raw materials to make the finished product.

Before the bidding, he hit upon the idea of circulating the tender notice by e-mail. In an accompanying letter, he said: "Catching brine shrimp eggs means fishermen have to camp by the lake in freezing temperature for a month. It

is not easy. I hope you will work with us to create a win-win future based on mutual trust."

And his efforts paid off. Ten bidders attended the public bidding. "We recorded a price of 70,000 yuan (\$10,126) per ton, the highest in the history of Shuanghu," Liang said.

In August, the processing factory will be ready and the processed eggs will bring more profits than the raw material. "Every impoverished Shuanghu resident is expected to earn an extra annual income of 3,990 yuan (\$594) on average," Liang said.

In addition, a specialty food developed from the eggs is expected to be available in the market soon. The county government is interested in partnerships with big domestic pharmaceutical companies to develop a drug with the EPA found in the eggs.

"Processing the eggs will create a reliable and long-term way out of poverty," Liang said.

## Mission continued

Due to the high altitude and ensuing difficulties, officials and professionals from supporting provinces, government departments and SOEs are deployed in Tibet for just three years. During their tenure, more than 30 percent of them suffer from high blood pressure, hyperlipidemia, and hyperuricemia, according to Shao Zhengyi, a Beijing doctor who worked at the People's Hospital of Lhasa in 2012.

After three years in Shuanghu, Liang has all three problems plus bone degradation, insomnia and frequent headaches due to the lack of oxygen in the air.

He also misses his wife and his 8-year-old daughter, who are in Beijing, thousands of miles away. "Because of my long absence, I am like a stranger to my daughter, who hardly talks to me," Liang sighed.

Though his tenure is to end on July 28, Liang has decided to ask for another three years' extension. "It's a critical moment in our fight against poverty. I must stay on to develop the local industry and accomplish my tasks," he said. "I hope my daughter will understand when she grows up." ■

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