

Book review: Stories of relocation and poverty alleviation in China: a review of Huanguang Qiu's sweet home

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Global poverty remains one of the most urgent and complex challenges of our time. As of mid-2025, an estimated 838 million people—around 10.5% of the world's population—live in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2025). This sobering figure reflects both long-term structural inequalities and recent setbacks. Although substantial progress has been made over the past few decades, the pace of poverty reduction slowed to just 0.6 percentage points per year between 2014 and 2019—the slowest rate in over 30 years, pushing millions back into poverty for the first time in a generation (World Bank, 2024). Against this backdrop, China's announcement in 2020 that it had eradicated extreme rural poverty stands out as a milestone of historical and global significance. One of the most ambitious components of this achievement was the country's relocation-based poverty alleviation program, which moved millions of people from ecologically vulnerable or economically stagnant areas into newly built resettlement communities.

It is within this context that *Sweet Home: The Stories of China's Relocation-Based Poverty Alleviation* by Professor Huanguang Qiu (China Renmin University Press, 2025) offers a timely and compelling contribution. The book combines rigorous field research with vivid storytelling to document the lived experiences of ten families over the course of a decade. By weaving together economic analysis, ethnographic observation and personal narrative, *Sweet Home* captures the complexity of poverty and the human dimensions of state-led development in contemporary China.

From policy to people

Sweet Home is a literary narrative grounded in empirical research. The book's strength lies in its ability to zoom in from a national policy to the level of everyday human experience. Yet as Qiu reminds us, relocation is more than geography—it is a transformation of identity, community and aspiration. While the material outcomes of China's poverty alleviation are extraordinary—expanded access to roads, clean water, electricity, education and healthcare—the book emphasizes an even deeper transformation: the change in people's mindset, agency and dignity.

Beginning in 2015, Qiu and his research team conducted long-term fieldwork across eight provinces, including Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan and Gansu in China. Using a mixed-methods approach drawn from development economics, sociology and anthropology, they followed ten families over ten years to document the long arc of social, cultural and economic change. The result is a book that is both analytically rich and emotionally resonant. These are not fictionalized accounts or top-down summaries. Instead, Qiu provides what anthropologists call “thick description”—layered, contextual and grounded in lived experience.



For example, in the story of the Ye family—former miners in Ankang—we see how illness, debt and economic instability fracture family structures, but also how new community institutions help them find stability. In “*The Zipline Village*,” we follow four generations of the Mao family as they move from a remote mountain village accessible only by zipline to a modern settlement. In “*The Purple Potatoes of My Heart*,” we meet Liu Chuanhua’s family, whose journey from hunger and discrimination to renewal reflects the resilience of millions of rural Chinese. Elsewhere in the book, Qiu tells of a family living along the banks of the Nuijiang River, whose resilience in the face of repeated misfortune is bolstered by the steady support of targeted poverty alleviation programs. Other chapters follow families grappling with generational tensions, cultural rupture and identity loss—all navigating the challenges of leaving behind familiar landscapes and customs for the uncertainties of a new life. Despite the diversity of settings and struggles, each story returns to a central, unifying theme: the search for dignity, opportunity and the meaning of “home” in the wake of displacement and transition.

Together, these ten narratives form the emotional and intellectual heart of *Sweet Home*. They paint a vivid portrait of China’s poverty alleviation campaign not as a monolithic success story, but as a diverse and multifaceted transformation of millions of individual lives. Through these deeply human stories, the book confronts readers with the complexities of development work. Relocation brings benefits but also uncertainty. It offers access to opportunity, but often at the cost of severing ties to land, tradition and memory.

Listening to stories, rethinking development

As global progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals continues to stall, *Sweet Home* offers a fresh and necessary perspective: that development must be as emotionally intelligent as it is technically sound. Qiu suggests that the barriers are not only economic or infrastructural. Instead, many poor communities face what might be called a “status quo trap”—a situation in which people hesitate to act because of the risks associated with change. The fear of uncertainty, cultural attachment to place, distrust in institutions, or lack of social capital may all contribute to this hesitation. As Qiu notes, effective poverty alleviation must therefore go beyond improving conditions—it must also inspire confidence, rebuild trust and enable people to envision themselves as agents of change.

This insight carries relevance far beyond China. Although the book’s narratives focus primarily on successful cases, the author does not ignore the tensions and difficulties inherent in poverty alleviation—challenges that are likely to arise in other national contexts as well. At the same time, the stories are rooted in China’s institutional, cultural and policy environment, underscoring the need for careful consideration before drawing lessons for other countries.

Conclusion: beyond metrics, toward meaning

In sum, *Sweet Home* is both a tribute and a challenge. It celebrates China’s success in lifting millions out of poverty through relocation, while also encouraging readers to reflect on the ethical, cultural and emotional dimensions of such interventions. The book broadens our understanding of what it means to alleviate poverty—not merely by raising incomes, but by reshaping lives.

As the global community continues its struggle to eradicate poverty, *Sweet Home* contributes to a growing recognition in development studies. It asks us to listen better, think deeper and remember that the success of any development program depends not only on how many are moved but on how many find a true sense of home. In this, the book serves as both an intellectual resource and a moral compass for development practitioners, scholars and policymakers alike.

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