

New Year brings new hope for poor Chinese

The cold winter wind rattled the window frames of Xu Haicheng's warm, cozy home. Inside sat an unlikely pair surrounded by receipts and papers.

Xu's house guest was President Xi Jinping, and Xi was helping the farmer with his household budget.

Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, for the past five years has made it an annual tradition to visit real Chinese before the Lunar New Year. On Monday and Tuesday, he was in Zhangbei County in the northern province of Hebei.

This is not the first year that Xi's New Year inspection tours have taken him to the front line of China's war against poverty.

He visited Gansu Province and Beijing in 2013, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 2014, Shaanxi Province in 2015 and Jiangxi Province in 2016.

Last year he also visited the provinces of Qinghai and Anhui, as well as Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, which are home to a high number of people living in poverty.

Just 200 kilometers north of Beijing, Zhangbei has been classed as a deprived county since 2013, but thanks to a major poverty-alleviation program it is receiving support, including measures to promote profitable agricultural products and emerging industries such as solar power.

Xu explained to the president that his family has 30 mu (2 ha) of land, upon which he grows potatoes, beets and oats.

The president picked up the man's budget.

"I can see that three mu of land produced 2,000 jin (1,000 kilograms) of potatoes, which you sold for two yuan (0.29 U.S. dollars) a jin. On 15 mu of land, however, you grow other crops that only sell for half a yuan a jin," said Xi, before adding, "That is a big price difference."

According to county officials, Zhangbei grows 20 percent of the nation's potatoes, and locals are keen to use more of their land to grow the lucrative tuber.

"You should develop industries and expand their scale according to market demand," Xi suggested.

Next Xi busied himself with some number crunching as he compared Xu's household income and expenses.

"You received a grain grant of over 2,500 yuan, another grant of 306 yuan for

reforesting land, and another for grassland protection for 1,140 yuan," Xi said. "Added to the money you make from farming, this means you earned 43,000 yuan."

"You spent 12,700 yuan on farming and another 29,000 yuan on various household expenses. This comes to 42,000 yuan, yes?" Xi asked.

Xu explained that he had to spend most of his income on his wife's medical treatment and tuition fees for his second daughter, who is studying Traditional Chinese Medicine, and the tuition costs him 18,000 yuan a year.

Xu's daughter told the president that she was also a recipient of a student bursary and was granted 1,500 yuan every semester.

Xi looked confused, "You earned 43,000 yuan but spent 42,000 yuan on farming, health care and education. How did you cover your day-to-day expenses?"

The farmers who also chatted with Xi at Xu's house explained that families in the village had limited outgoings.

"We grow our own food and make linseed oil by ourselves," one villager said. "I spent 600 yuan at most on coal for heating," said another.

The conversations gave the president pause for thought.

He said medical insurance for serious diseases must work well in rural areas, as families can easily slip back into poverty due to the financial burden of ill health.

Moreover, he added, all rural children should be covered by the national education policy that guarantees them nine years of free, compulsory schooling, and access to additional financial assistance.

During his tour, Xi also listened to local Party cadres who briefed him on measures they had implemented under the poverty-alleviation program, such as solar power and infrastructure projects, and training schemes for farmers.

Xi reminded the officials that they must take the lead in the fight against poverty.

The key to building an all-round moderately prosperous society by 2020 will be implementation, Xi noted.

Following the commitment that China will eliminate poverty by 2020, huge strides in poverty reduction have been achieved.

Over the past four years, the country has lifted 60 million people out of poverty. Moreover, government spending on poverty hit a record high in 2016, exceeding 100 billion yuan for the first time.

The central budget allocated 66.7 billion yuan for poverty reduction this year, up 43.4 percent year on year, while provincial governments' allocations rose more than 50 percent, topping 40 billion yuan.

In late 2016, China issued a poverty alleviation plan for 2016 to 2020, promising to help over 56 million people who live in the country's poorest villages and counties.

"I care most about the poor," Xi said in his New Year speech on the last day of 2016. His words have resonated with millions of Chinese, who like Xu, will start the new year with renewed hope that their lives are on course to improve.