

COMMENTARY

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Life of cliff dwellers now solidly grounded

China's poverty alleviation program will end their need to make a death-defying journey to and from their homes

by [George Koo](#)

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Access to the cliff village of Atulieer, Zhaojue county, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, southwest China's Sichuan province.

Photo: IC Photo via AFP

A three-minute video that went viral showed up in my e-mail inbox. The video, a [version of which](#) was posted by the British Broadcasting Corporation among others, showed cliff dwellers clambering up and down a steel ladder in the mountainous southern region of China.

There were women carrying heavy appliances on their backs, elderly women being piggybacked by younger men, a young mother with an infant on her back and a rope on her hand tied to a toddler, all making their way up the vertical ladder. At the top, they stepped on ledges narrower than the length of their feet as they negotiated the cliffside path to their homes.



Photos: Climbing 'sky ladders' to school

Just seeing the sheer drop turned my legs to jelly, but the villagers sauntered with casual aplomb as if taking a routine stroll through the park.

The clifftop village called Atulieer is at the southern edge of Sichuan province. At a 1,600-meter elevation, the village consisted of 84 households belonging to the Yi ethnic minority. Four years ago, a newspaper showed photos of schoolchildren going up and down an 800-meter network of rattan ladders with no handrails.

Their school was located at the bottom of the cliff. One couple would not let their daughter attend school until she was 11, when they felt she was strong enough to “walk” to school safely.

After the national publicity, the local government built a 2.8-kilometer network of steel ladders with handrails along the face of the cliff. The new ladders made it much easier for the villagers to take their produce to market, cutting the travel time from three hours to one.

This year, as part of China’s poverty alleviation program, the 84 households are being

relocated to new apartments about 70km from the cliff dwellings. The residents will have kitchens, toilets and running water for the first time in their lives. They will purchase their apartments at less than one-thirtieth of market rate.

They will also participate in the local economy without the disadvantage of having to scale the cliff, and their children can attend school on level ground.

Because of the national publicity on the village, it will be turned into a tourist attraction with a cablecar for the tourists. Some of the cliff homes have been converted into guest houses. In case you’re interested, it is located in Zhaojue in Sichuan province. Tourism will become an important source of income for these Yi minority people.

Some time in history, the Yi people found rich farmland at the top of the cliffs and have settled there since the Yuan dynasty (800-900 years ago). For generations, they enjoyed a life of self-sufficiency and feeling of security free from the dangers of marauding soldiers and bandits. But the modern economy has passed



Children travel to school in China's Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture

them by and their location became a severe handicap as they were not able to keep up with modern development and progress.

This year is the turn of the clifftop village to be part of the national poverty alleviation program. According China's State Statistics Bureau, by the end of 2012, there were nearly 100 million people in rural areas living below the poverty line. By the end of 2019, there were only 5.5 million such people.

By end of this year, the headcount of those still living in poverty will be fewer by at least the 84 households that moved to their new quarters.

George Koo recently retired from a global advisory services firm where he advised clients on their China strategies and business operations. Educated at MIT, Stevens Institute and Santa Clara University, he is the founder and former managing director of International Strategic Alliances. He is currently a board member of Freschfield's, a novel green building platform.

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Here's the back story on the ladder climbing video, copy attached. It's also an example of China's poverty alleviation program. [VIDEO-2020-04-21-00-47-40.em4](#)

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