

Institutional issues behind the "Wall of Shame" story

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Gansu's Yongjing County has been designated as a national priority area for poverty relief (国家扶重点), with a poverty rate of 10 percent, going as high as 70 percent in some villages and townships. But reporting in the area recently, Xinhua News Agency reporters found that "walls of shame" had been erected in nine places on both sides of the highway, totaling some two kilometers, and that these were there to obstruct the view of the dilapidated home and courtyards of the peasants. What is most significant is that for many of the peasants whose homes have been blocked off by the wall of shame, food and water [supplies] are basic needs, and because they have insufficient money to buy bricks to use in building aqueducts, they cannot get water into the villages. And according to the [Xinhua] report, one meter of this "wall of shame" costs around 100 yuan. According to a leader in one of the villages 40,000 yuan was spent for their 400 meter section of wall.

Perhaps for some Party and government offices, the outer beauty of the countryside and pretended splendor are more important than the real-life realities of these villagers. For some leaders, the broken-down homes stand to affect their achievements fighting poverty [in the eyes of their superiors], and so the idea of a wall to hide their many inadequacies was hatched and quickly carried out. They made no effort to seek the opinions of the villagers ... and was they were after was the elevation of their local image, particularly that they would win points in the eyes of their superior leaders when they visited on inspection tours.

This kind of high-wall culture has long been a form of self-protection in traditional culture. It is a kind of precaution against the outside world, designed to provide ease of mind. As our society progresses (随着社会文明), many cities have begun to advocate the opening of walls and [the creation of more] green space, allowing the space outside and inside walls come together. Gansu's Yongjing County has opened a new chapter in the history of wall culture, turning it to another end. They have taken monies intended for the people and applied it to build walls against them, disguising the realities of poverty ...

The building of a new countryside is not about the "new building of the villages". It should not be a new re-packaging of the cultural wall. Nor can we simply achieve it by rebuilding the homes of peasants. What the new countryside demands are new human concepts (人文理念). It is about paying attention to the lives and productivity of the peasants to raise the overall strength of the countryside. Some areas have allowed for the building of villas using rural loan programs, lending the countryside the appearance of modernity virtually overnight, but in the end the peasants are unable to repay these loans and become bankrupt and dispirited. The basic sense of the new countryside is allowing for a countryside capable of sustainable production and living ...

As we question the political conscience of these local leaders, we must also ask ourselves about the related [leadership] systems. We must address the system to prevent this "aesthetics of pretense" (假象美学) and ensure various regions are not overrun with walls of shame. This is the key to rooting out vicious local governance that cheats and deceives the world.

[Posted by David Bandurski, April 19, 2007, 2:15pm]

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