

# Solar farms lift villagers away from poverty



6,602 villages in Shanxi have operated photovoltaic facilities which contribute to community revenue

By YUANG SHENGGAO

Autumn is the best season of the year in Shilou county, Shanxi province, when the sky turns to the color of enamel blue and stretches to the horizon.

Seen from a higher point of view, the hill slopes in the county's Erlangpo Mountain area also give a reflection of dazzling blue, presenting a montage created by modern science and technology. The reflection is from the photovoltaic panels of solar farms owned and operated by eight villages near Erlangpo.

The solar farms turn the sunlight into electricity, which, through a 110-kilovolt substation, is connected to the State grid, supplying households and industrial facilities throughout the county.

"The solar farms are also turning sunlight into cash and fortune for hundreds of households in the neighborhood," said Hu Yuhai, deputy chief of the rural vitalization bureau of Shilou county.

He said all the 113 villages in Shilou have been engaged in operating solar farms aimed at eliminating poverty.

"With a combined installation capacity of 56.3 megawatts, these solar farms can generate a total annual revenue of more than 65 million yuan (\$8.94 million) for villagers," Hu said. "That can translate into about 500,000 yuan for each village on average, benefiting more than 9,600 households that used to be registered as impoverished families."

Erji village in the county of Daning in the southwest of Shanxi is another example of an area using solar power for poverty relief and rural vitalization.

Ma Huansuo, whose family used to be registered as impoverished, is now working as a cleaner in the village. He clearly understands the association between his job and the village solar farm.

"I was told that the solar farm contributes 300,000 yuan annually to



A huge solar farm in the village of Guojiahe in Shilou county, Shanxi province. WANG YIWEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

the public account of the villagers' committee," Ma said. "The committee uses the money as expenditure on creating new jobs for impoverished or lower-income residents, like cleaners, security guards and solar farm workers."

As a cleaner, Ma said the pay is stable and the work is flexible. "I do cleaning in the morning and take care of the crops on my farm the rest of the day."

Featuring sufficient sunlight, Shanxi began to use the solar power industry for rural poverty alleviation in the period between 2015 and 2016.

The provincial government selected five counties — Fenxi, Daning, Jixian, Tianzhen and Hunyuan — as pilots for the "solar-aided" poverty alleviation campaign.

Building on their success, Shanxi has popularized the experience to villages across the province since 2017.

The provincial government issued a guideline that year for implementation of the campaign, which made it clear that the solar farms should be operated by the villagers' committees and the revenue from the farms should be used exclusively for poverty alleviation. The expenditure should go to such areas as subsidies and jobs created for impoverished residents.

Governments at various levels

have offered financial assistance and other supportive measures for the construction of the village solar farms.

The Shanxi Rural Vitalization Bureau, for instance, established a special fund to support the development of village solar farms and facilities to connect them with State or provincial power grids.

The county of Linxian, which is located at the heart of the Lyuliang Mountains, used to be one of the least-developed counties in Shanxi province.

But today, Linxian has grown into one of the Shanxi counties with the most developed solar power industry, said Li Youxi, head of the county's rural vitalization bureau.

"As every impoverished village and every impoverished resident are involved with the solar power industry, the village solar farms have played a crucial role in poverty alleviation," Li said. "The village solar farms can generate a combined revenue of 160 million yuan every year, meaning that each of the 447 previously impoverished villages can get an annual revenue of more than 200,000 yuan."

Li recalled the enthusiasm of local villagers was strong when the county began to construct the Yulinshan Solar Farm in 2018. With a power

generation capacity of 30 megawatts, this was one of the largest solar power facilities in Linxian and it was designed to offer revenue to dozens of villages in its neighborhood.

"The project broke ground on Sept 8 and more than 10,000 people — many of whom were nearby villagers — took part in its construction," Li said. "The construction proceeded at an astonishing speed and its operation started in less than three months."

Zhang Yuhong, chief of the provincial rural vitalization bureau, said governments at various levels in Shanxi invested a total of 21.16 billion yuan to support the building of village solar farms and power generation facilities.

To date, Shanxi has a total of 5,479 village solar farms targeting poverty alleviation in 75 counties, with a combined power generation capacity reaching 2.94 million kW.

"In 2021, when the government announced the elimination of absolute poverty throughout the province, the revenue generated from these poverty-relieving solar farms approximated 2 billion yuan, benefiting 6,602 villages and about 720,000 households," Zhang said. "So it's no exaggeration to say that the solar farms have played a crucial role in poverty alleviation."

Now that victory against poverty has been announced, the solar farms are used as a tool to boost rural vitalization, helping to increase revenue for residents and preventing them from returning to poverty, according to Zhang.

"As the large-scale development of solar farms has been completed, the operators of these farms are now shifting their focus to ensuring their effective operation, making sure that farms are managed in a transparent way and the revenues can go to the undertakings closely pertaining to the improvement of people's livelihoods," the official said.

Zhao Erding, a resident in the village of Jijiagang in Yangqu county, now finds life much easier thanks to the village solar farm. His family used to be registered as impoverished several years ago.

"The solar farm began operating in 2016 and now it pays me, as well as others in the village, a dividend of 1,000 yuan every month," Zhao said. "But this is not the only source of revenue as I also work with a greenhouse vegetable farm in the village."

His fellow villager, Zhao Hongmei, now works as a cook at the village's elder care center.

Zhao is paid 900 yuan a month for cooking the meal at noon and the

rest of day, she takes care of her own farm.

Both the greenhouse farm and the elder care center were established with funding from the solar farm, said Guo Ruiyi, the head of the village. He added that there are also other jobs created with solar farm revenue, including forest patrolling and village cleaning.

Guo said Jijiagang village gets an annual revenue of 160,000 yuan from the solar farm and how to effectively manage this asset "is a serious thing for the villagers' committee and villagers."

"We hold regular meetings of villagers for the budget and expenditure. The establishment of every project is the result of consensus among villagers," Guo said. "Our principle is to ensure the jobs of the lower-income residents while contributing to improving the livelihoods of all."

Guo's view resonated with Feng Haihu, head of Houzegou village in the county of Fangshan.

"When the solar farms are in place, villagers always say that they can see the money stream in from the sunlight. Indeed, the physical operation of a solar farm will focus on simple things like maintenance. So in this context, the management of revenue is of paramount importance," Feng said.

He added that while the larger amount of revenue is used to consolidate the fruits of poverty alleviation, the rest can be used to improve the living and farming conditions.

"We are launching projects to improve the soil, build a water supply system and roads, as well as develop elder care service," Feng said. "Such undertakings used to be carried out with funding from villagers and now they are all covered by the revenue from the solar farm."

He noted that the village officials did not have experience in asset management but the timely issuance of guidelines by the provincial government makes things easier.

Shanxi is the first in China to issue a suggestive document on the management of village solar farms targeting poverty alleviation, which proposed all the systematic measures for transparent and effective management of solar farm revenue, like strict exposure of revenue and expenditure, villagers' meetings, democratic decision-making and public supervision on projects.

"The guidelines can immediately translate into viable practices in revenue and budget management in villages," Feng said.

Li Quanhong contributed to this story.

## Briton revealing tour of a greener province

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Rees Tyrrel, a Briton teaching English at Taiyuan University of Technology in Shanxi, likes to tour various parts of the province to see the cultural and natural wonders of the area as well as its local life.

A recent program launched by the information office of the Shanxi provincial government gave him an opportunity to have an immersive experience in the province.

The program is called Deep in Shanxi. It invites foreigners to intensively tour Shanxi, telling stories about the province from a foreigner's point of view.

Tyrrel's travels have taken him to Taiyuan, Datong, Jinzhong, Linfen, Yangquan and Shuozhou. Even in Taiyuan, the city where the 25-year-old has lived for two years, he discovered many things.

Fenhe Park in Taiyuan was the first stop in Tyrrel's journey.

The Fenhe is the second-largest river in Shanxi. Taiyuan is home to a 188-kilometer section of the river and Fenhe Park lies on a 43-km-long scenic belt of the river.

It was in the park that Tyrrel met local photographer Zhang Xiangdong, who showed him the wide variety of birds there, including some he didn't notice before.



Rees Tyrrel feeds a lamb in Zhangqianhuling village, Shilou county. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"Fenhe Park is the habitat for about 250 varieties of birds, including rare species like the crested grebe," Zhang told Tyrrel, adding the increasing number of birds is an indicator of the river's improving environment.

Shanxi began to improve the river in the 1990s. Three decades of efforts turned the river into a picturesque belt of hundreds of miles and an ideal habitat for both humans and wildlife.

He was later informed that one place that should be remembered by all for its painstaking efforts in environmental protection is the county of Youyu in the northwest of Shanxi.

Youyu was once a drought-plagued area where the living conditions of residents were threatened by sandstorms and desertification. In the 1950s, the vegetation coverage there was only about 0.3 percent.

After generations of effort, Youyu was turned into a huge green oasis with vegetation coverage reaching some 57 percent.

In Youyu, walking on the roads and paths shaded by lush trees, Tyrrel said: "It may be hard to believe

that around 70 years ago the majority of the land here was part of the desert and covered in sand."

The improving ecological environment has made Youyu one of the renowned animal farming bases in Shanxi. In the village of Zhangqianhuling, Tyrrel experienced both the traditional and modern ways of herding sheep.

Wang Yue, a 73-year-old herder, used a whip to lead the sheep to graze on a hill. His way of herding was in sharp contrast with that of Zhang Yong, who used a drone to look after his animals.

Tyrrel tried to learn both skills but didn't seem to succeed given the short period of time he was there.

Tyrrel's journey also included a trip to the daylily farms in Datong. The flower of a daylily is a popular food ingredient nationwide and the city is one of the major production bases for the crop in China.



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## Liquor maker renews effort to go global as outlet opens in Hainan

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The Haikou International Duty-Free City Shopping Complex — the world's largest stand-alone duty-free facility — became operational on Oct 28 in Haikou, the capital city of the island province of Hainan in South China.

Among the outlets in the mall with a total floor space of 280,000 square meters is Xinghuacun Fenjiu Group, a renowned white liquor producer in Shanxi province. It is one of the most eye-catching in the mall.

The outlet is decorated with elements of traditional Chinese culture, aiming to arouse the

interest of customers about the culture and history related to this time-honored and maybe oldest Chinese white liquor brand, according to the company.

Xinghuacun Fenjiu was among the first batch of liquor brands to begin operations at the Haikou duty-free mall. It was the first among the liquor brands to record a transaction on the opening day, the company said.

The company's executives said Xinghuacun Fenjiu expects to use the outlet as a gateway to reach more overseas customers and dealers.

As Hainan is stepping up its efforts to build itself into an

international free trade port, the opening of the duty-free shopping mall is a signature event, Hainan Governor Feng Fei said at the opening ceremony. "Offshore duty-free shopping has become one of the great calling cards of Hainan's tourism sector."

Over the past few years, about one in two travelers — either from China or overseas — to the tropical island visited duty-free shops and one in six purchased offshore duty-free goods, said Feng.

An expected boom in the duty-free tourism industry after the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will serve as another effective means to help Xinghuacun Fenjiu go global, according to the company's executives.

The company began to step up its globalization move at the beginning of this century, especially after China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Its high-end white liquor varieties were sold to South Korea in 2007, marking a milestone in its globalization.

It opened its first overseas sales outlet in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, in 2013.

To date, white liquor products made by Xinghuacun Fenjiu have been sold to foreign markets through its 50-plus dealers. They are available in more than 9,000 overseas outlets, including 180-plus duty-free shops, the company's executives said.

Li Shu contributed to this story.



Xinghuacun Fenjiu staff members show the varieties of liquor to customers at the opening of its outlet in the Haikou duty-free shopping complex. WEN ZHAOYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY