

Anhui

The uphill battle of Shanghai's poorest neighbor



The story behind Anhui's poverty isn't one-dimensional, nor is it hopeless. Some of the factors are as unique as the region's mountainous topography, while others reflect the plight of all rural Chinese. Leslie Jones and Rae-min Zhang headed to the hills for this special report.

“His life is a little hard, but he’s a good kid.”

Wang Xiangkun’s grandfather sits across from his quiet 11-year-old grandson in the family farmhouse. Half a dozen academic awards are pasted up behind the bed where Wang sits. Three years ago his parents left to work in Shanghai. He quit playing with other kids and seldom spoke for months after they went away.

Wang lives in Tiantou village, a tea farming community in Dabie Shan, the mountain range along Anhui’s western border. His grandparents are farmers who only speak the local dialect, no standard Mandarin, and cannot read. They live a subsistence lifestyle, raising pigs and chickens and growing their own rice. Wang’s parents send money home, but most of it is socked away for his college fees. The family has pinned its hopes on Wang entering university, an odds-defying feat for any child from the countryside.

“My son always asks me to bring him to Shanghai, I tell him I can’t afford it. Every year when we come home he’ll cry a lot and beg us to stay. He’ll say, ‘I can use less money.’ Every time I tell him I have no choice.”

This spring a group of Shanghainese 10th-graders bused up the winding mountain road to Dabie Shan for a stint at Wang’s elementary school. They came equipped with iPads and SLR cameras, gadgets that cost the better half of what some local families will see in a year. The teenagers are students at Shanghai World Foreign Language Middle

School, a private school for Chinese students preparing for college overseas. Yearly tuition is about RMB80,000. The entire annual budget for the village school is RMB24,000.

Anhui is China’s eighth most-populous province and one of its poorest. The province’s monthly minimum wage is RMB720 and the average rural household has a yearly income of RMB12,473, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. One in five women over the age of 15 is either illiterate or semi-literate and 13 percent of the population cannot read proficiently. There is little homegrown private industry to speak of. Flagship companies Chery Automobile and Anhui Conch Cement are both state-and-private joint run projects. Anhui is also the nation’s largest supplier of migrant labor; a little over half of Shanghai’s migrant labor force comes from Anhui or Jiangsu.

“My son always asks me to bring him to Shanghai, I tell him I can’t afford it,” says Wang’s mother, Lin Xiaoping, who cleans hotel rooms six days a week in Shanghai. “Every year when we come home he’ll cry a lot and beg us to stay. He’ll say, ‘I can use less money.’ Every time I tell him I have no choice.”

Lin and her husband, Wang Wusheng, live in a tiny second-floor room big enough for a bed, closet and table. There’s no running water, so they hand-carry their cooking water and use the neighborhood public toilet. Lin showers at work and her husband sponge bathes at home. Wang works as a night watchman every day of the week and gets fined if he misses a day. Their combined income is RMB3,500 a month, half of which they send home, leaving just enough for their rent and food – rice and vegetables they cook themselves.

“But it’s easy for us to get used to the life here, because we’ve always been poor,” Wang says.

One of the most curious aspects of Anhui’s poverty is its proximity to the epicenter of China’s economic powerhouses. It takes three hours by high-speed train from Shanghai to Hefei, Anhui’s capital. And to the east lie Zhejiang and Jiangsu, two of the country’s wealthiest provinces and models for rural development.

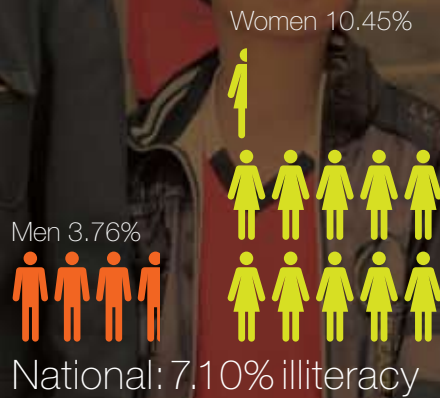
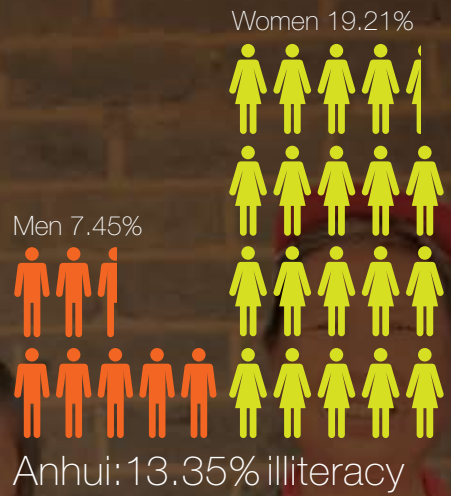
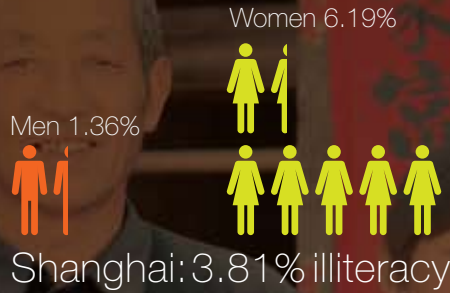
Despite the phenomenal growth on the Yangtze River Delta, Anhui has somehow missed out. In Shanghai, it’s often dismissed as backward countryside – the place where ayis come from, home of Huangshan (Yellow Mountain) and very little else.

But the story behind Anhui’s poverty isn’t one-dimensional, nor is it hopeless. Some of the factors are as unique as the region’s mountainous topography. But others echo the plight of all rural Chinese, both those who move to the big city and those who remain in the countryside.

Up until 1667, Anhui was part of Jiangnan, one of the highest tax-paying provinces in the nation. The reigning Manchu Qing Dynasty split the region into Jiangsu and Anhui, cutting the latter off from the coast. Today, parts of

Percentage of population that's illiterate over 15 years old

(2009, Source: 2010 China Statistical Yearbook)



Leasing/Business Services

Shanghai: 18

Anhui: 4.3



Scientific Research/Tech/GeoProspect

Shanghai: 20.9

Anhui: 6.0



Public Management/Social Org

Shanghai: 18.3

Anhui: 46.1

Employment (in 10,000 people) (2009, Source: 2010 China Statistical Yearbook)

Average earning/year (in RMB)

(2009, Source: 2010 China Statistical Yearbook)

National: 32,244

Shanghai: 58,336

Anhui: 28,723

Net household per capita (in RMB)



Death in labor

Shanghai: 7.8/100,000

Anhui: 20.5/100,000

Anhui that border Jiangsu still enjoy a standard of living closer aligned with the coastal province.

“There’s always a debate in my town about whether it should belong to Anhui or Jiangsu, basically most people wish it were part of Jiangsu simply because it’s richer than Anhui,” says Wu Yun, a Shanghai-based magazine editor and Anhui native.

Anhui’s borders are almost the same today as three centuries ago. Lack of port access has plagued the region ever since. Still, in 1861 the Qing government chose to seat its military-industrial complex in Anqing, Anhui’s former capital. China’s first steam engine was built there.

Anhui sustained its next planning blow after the PRC was formed. The new government decided to move the capital from culture-rich Anqing, which traces its official status back over 2,000 years, to centrally-located Hefei, disparaged for being ‘China’s biggest county’ rather than a true city.

Huangshan, one of China’s top tourist destinations and now a UNESCO World Heritage site, is located in southern Anhui, but there are only two highways linking it to the rest of the Yangtze River Delta. The government chose instead to invest in roads linking Hefei to impoverished northern Anhui.

Bad infrastructure decisions were made on top of inherently challenging terrain: northern Anhui is prone to flooding. More than a quarter of a million people had to be evacuated during an especially bad flood in 2003. And the south comprises two mountain ranges, which make development problematic.

Despite geography, Anhui was a pioneer for economic reform in rural China. In 1978, a handful of farming families in Fengyang County signed private contracts to work the collectively owned land in their village. It was a first step toward dismantling agricultural communes. The village’s success paved the way for change nationwide.

When reform took hold, foreign investment poured into the region, but the more accessible coastal provinces took the lion’s share. In the early ’90s the Yangtze River Delta Economic Zone was formed. Zhejiang, Jiangsu and under-construction Pudong comprised the area aimed at attracting foreign investors. Anhui was not included in the newly planned area. A few years later, developing western China rose on the list of national planning priorities. Since it was considered a central province, Anhui missed out once again. NGOs have had trouble drumming up funding for projects in the predominantly Han Chinese province.

International children’s welfare NGO Save the Children began work in Anhui in the late 1980s, mainly in health and education, but in 2009 they were forced to close their office there.

“It’s much more difficult to raise funds for Anhui because it sounds like an ordinary central province to donors,”

spokeswoman Qian Xiaofeng says. Though the office closed, Save the Children still supports several Anhui projects.

As its neighbors to the east sped ahead, Anhui languished. In the north, desperation bore deadly consequences. HIV infected thousands of poor villagers who sold blood in unsanitary conditions on the black market in the mid-’90s. To this day several counties in northern Anhui are known for having ‘AIDS villages.’ *The Blood of Yingzhou District*, a 2006 Academy Award-winning documentary, illustrated the plight of children in Anhui orphaned by AIDS.

“It’s much more difficult to raise funds for Anhui because it sounds like an ordinary central province to donors”

All over Anhui, local governments struggled when the funding burden for new national policies fell on them. And too often rural people suffered bitterly at the hand of officials who were not only ineffective but corrupt, sometimes to a violent degree. In 2007 *People’s Daily* posted an online poll asking readers why Anhui lags so far behind: 28 percent blamed government inefficiency and 21 percent said it was because of unstable policy and corruption.

Things were especially bad in the countryside in the ’90s. Some of the bloodiest instances of villager exploitation garnered national media attention.

One case of victimization by local government took place in 1998 and resulted in four deaths in a village in Guzhen County. Outspoken members of the community had petitioned the local party committee multiple times for an audit of village finances. The deputy village chief took exception to their pleas. He invited one petitioner to his home and had the man beaten – a show of intimidation that only served to rally the villagers. They banded together and demanded an investigation at the township office. So finally a village audit was scheduled.

On the morning the audit was to begin, the deputy village chief and two of his sons showed up at the home of one of the local men chosen to conduct the audit. They killed the man with a meat cleaver. The commotion was heard

by three men – two other auditors plus the dead man's brother – and when they rushed over to help they too were stabbed to death. The teenage son of one victim came and tried to drag his dying father to safety. He was stabbed in the shoulder and narrowly escaped with his life.

County police arrived quickly and arrested the official and his sons, but local authorities tried to bury the true nature of the dispute. Villagers were instructed not to talk about it. Initial news reports called it a case of “manslaughter” related to a civic dispute and implied the victims provoked their attackers. Eventually the story trickled up and national media arrived. Reporters saw for themselves that where villagers had meager furnishing, most cadres had

“On the morning the audit was to begin the deputy village chief and two of his sons showed up at the home of one of the local men chosen to conduct the audit. They killed the man with a meat cleaver.”

refrigerators and TVs. *Southern Weekly* and *Democracy and Law* magazine came out with long reports on the quadruple murder and the true story behind it, but not until a full four months after the fact.

At that time, reports of village cadres foisting exploitative taxes were widespread. Officials put in charge of poor villages in remote townships were difficult to hold accountable. It proved easy enough in many instances for corrupt officials to impose taxes on a whim, despite national laws limiting the tax burden of rural people. Even today, it can be a dangerous feat for rural Chinese to seek relief from unjust government. In April, a group of women from Gansu traveled to Beijing to complain about the mishandling of earthquake relief funds. *Shanghai Daily* reported that the women said after they arrived in the capital they were stripped of their clothes and beaten by men dressed in black, and forced into a van that spirited them back to Gansu before they could make their report.

Anhui's history of bad government extends well beyond village tyrants. In 2003 a former Anhui vice-governor was sentenced to death for accepting bribes, then again in 2007 another vice-governor and a former deputy secretary of the Anhui Provincial CPC Committee received the death

penalty for corruption. The following year Anhui's former railway boss was sent to prison for taking bribes and misappropriating funds. And last year Zhang Zhian, a former party secretary from Fuyang, was sentenced to death for taking millions in bribes and persecuting those who tried to expose his corruption (one whistle blower hanged himself in prison after being framed by Zhang). Before he was brought to justice, Zhang earned the nickname ‘White House director’ after he had an RMB30 million district office built to look like the White House.

Not all corruption in Anhui is blatantly self-serving. In 1985 compulsory education through grade nine became national law, but the burden to fund schools fell to county and township government. Over the last two decades impoverished areas have struggled to keep schools afloat. Counties accrued debt in the tens of millions in the early '90s trying to achieve national education goals. In 2000 Anhui served as the test ground for a new tax policy meant to alleviate the rural people's tax burden and cut down on extortion. It proved successful but also meant less revenue was collected, which meant even less education funding. So local officials got creative.

In 2008 a National Audit Office report revealed RMB150 million in illegally-collected fees from 54 counties nationwide. Money was collected in the name of exam fees, book fees, after-school programs and ‘donations.’ Much of the misappropriated money was used to pay off old debt and build new schools. Around the same time the report came out, central government stepped in and pledged to relieve the financial burden on rural schools.

“It's getting better. Things have become much easier in the past few years,” Tiantou village elementary school principal Wu Dexin says, seated in the school conference room while his students play in the yard with the Shanghai teens.

Tiantou's students no longer have to worry about book fees. Many of the students whose homes are farther up in the mountains sleep at the school during the week, and their boarding fees are subsidized now too. Still, village schools have a long way to go. Rural students are at an extreme disadvantage. A senior teacher in Tiantou only makes about RMB2,000 per month. Resources are scarce; textbooks are free, but there are essentially no supplementary or enrichment materials, no free reading books and no sports. Wang Xiangkun, the boy whose parents moved to Shanghai, wants to study computers in the future, but seldom gets a chance to use one now. Education NGOs say rural students lack opportunity to develop critical thinking and social skills because classes focus exclusively on standardized test preparation. Plus there aren't extracurricular activities, as there are in the city, where kids can learn by doing.

Teachers look uneasy when the topic of college prospects comes up. “The students study very hard now, so many of them will go to university,” they say, but statistics do not back up this hopeful assertion. The college enrollment rate in 2009 was 14 percent for the entire province. Presently, less than 2 percent of rural Anhui people have college educations, according to one development report.

GDP per capita (in RMB)



Foreign Investment in 2008 (in 100 million USD)

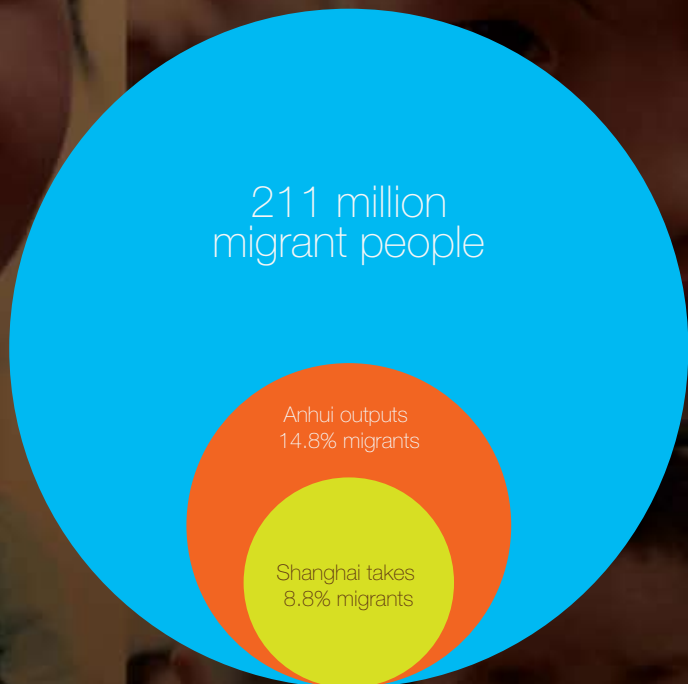
(2009, Source: 2010 China Statistical Yearbook)

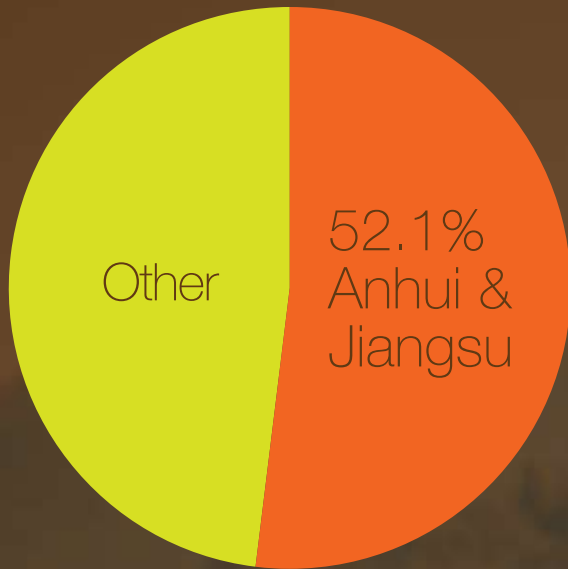
Jiangsu: 4159
Zhejiang: 1583
Anhui: 255*

*Anhui ranks 21st

211 million migrant people nationwide

(2010, Source: Report on China's Migrant Population Development)





Immigrants in Shanghai

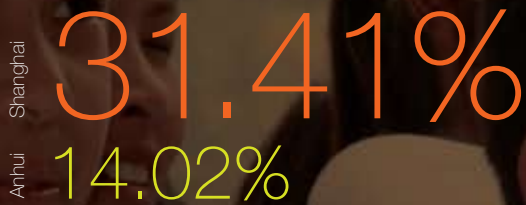
Shanghai: 2.8

National: 8.75

Anhui: 8.24

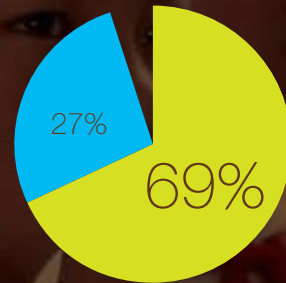
2010 College enrollment rate

(Source: Provincial Population Development and Modernization of Education)



Infant mortality (per 10,000)

(2008, Source: 2009 China Statistical Yearbook)



69% migrant workers wish to stay where they work long-term

27% plan to return home



Average Anhui agriculture salary (in RMB):

12,473/year

(2008, Source: 2009 China Statistical Yearbook)

“Before he was brought to justice, Zhang earned the nickname ‘White House director’ after he had an RMB30 million district office built to look like the White House”

“We are too limited,” teachers in Tiantou say over and over. “This place is just too poor.”

It is against that backdrop that so many Anhui people set out for migrant work. A 2004 survey by the Anhui Statistical Bureau reported that some 16 percent of the population left the province to seek work. The number of children in Yuexi County living with grandparents or other relatives has quadrupled in the past decade, according to the county education bureau. The majority of elementary school students in Tiantou Village have at least one parent working far from home. Wu, the principal, says it’s easy to see the difference: when parents leave grades drop and when they return they go back up.

“Our teachers wind up taking on the role of parents,” he says, because grandparents are often unequipped to keep up with the educational and psychological needs of their grandchildren.

“It is a worry,” Lin Xiaoping says, seated in her room in Shanghai on her off day. “We feel very sorry for our children. We call every week, but it’s always short greetings. You can’t really know what’s actually going on.”

Last year Shanghai became the first city in China to propose free education for school-aged migrant children. In other parts of the country, the hukou system bars migrant children from attending city-funded public schools because they lack an urban hukou (a permanent resident permit that affords municipal public benefits). Students who accompany parents to the city often attend unlicensed private schools, which can be expensive and academically sub-par. Even in Shanghai, migrant children must return to

their villages if they choose to attend high school. Grace Nieh, Shanghai regional manager for charity Compassion for Migrant Children, says about one-third of migrant children go home for high school, and of that number about 40 percent wind up returning to the city for work in a couple of years because they can’t adjust to village life or are unable to get into high school.

“Of course we wish our son could come here for high school,” Lin says. “But we haven’t thought about the future. Right now we just want to continue making money.”

Though Wang Xiangkun’s parents have no plans to move back to the mountains, many migrant workers did return home to Anhui last year, about 3 million according to the provincial Department of Human Resources and Social Security. As manufacturing costs rise along the coast and infrastructure improves (Anhui doubled its length of highways in the last six years), industry is moving inland. In May the Anhui Economic Information Center reported a 13 percent increase in GDP – the greatest fiscal revenue increase the province has seen in 15 years. Korean electronics manufacturer Samsung and Canadian auto parts supplier Magna International (two of the world’s 500 biggest companies) entered Anhui this year. UPS invested RMB100 million in a business services park in Hefei. In April JA Solar broke ground in Hefei on what will be the world’s largest integrated solar energy production center. Levels of disposable income in Anhui are growing rapidly too and consumer goods manufacturers are taking notice.

“Hefei is a place we go to quite frequently for consumer research, because income is growing really fast there,” says China Market Research senior analyst James Roy. “The luxury market there is picking up.”

But it’s still a full day’s drive from Hefei to the villages tucked high and away in Dabie Shan. Locals say that things are better than they were; 10 years ago the roads were worse and all the homes were traditional farmhouses. Now there’s a strip of square concrete buildings that line Tiantou’s main street. A couple of villagers have returned from urban industrial centers and used the skills they learned to open little clothing factories. They’re doing well, making more than a principal does, says Wu.

On a Thursday morning the Shanghai teenagers prepare to leave. It’s been a full few days of interacting with their Dabie Shan counterparts through music, games and crafts. Local kids offer up handfuls of wildflowers and friendship bracelets as the teenagers head for the bus. There are lots of hugs and tears before they board. Even some of the local teachers dab their eyes, but Wang Xiangkun doesn’t cry. Every Chinese New Year he has a much harder goodbye to say. After the teens depart, it’s back to normal for the grade-schoolers – class time followed by a heavy homework regimen. Everyone knows education is the most hopeful path down the mountain. That’s why Wang’s parents work so far away.

// To make a donation to Dabie Shan village schools, contact Liz Lou at Shanghai World Foreign Language Middle School on 5419 0200 ext 8508 or ttllxx_5@hotmail.com