

The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is launching a nationwide propaganda effort ahead of the centenary of the party's founding on July 1, lauding general secretary Xi Jinping's "victory" over poverty and ordering officials to watch patriotic TV shows.

An employee of the CCP's official newspaper, the People's Daily, told RFA on condition of anonymity that party newspapers in all localities were recently instructed to work together with the central propaganda department to plan retrospective features and special reports singing the CCP's praises.

Local events will also be mandatory during the month surrounding the anniversary, the employee said.

"There will be events run by party committees and also mass public events to spread propaganda about party history," the employee said.

"These will go on for more than a month."

Forcing loyalty

Earlier this month, authorities in the northern port city of Tianjin ordered all party committees in public bodies and state-sector industry to organizing screenings of the patriotic TV series "Crossing the Yalu River," and to report back on the scheduling of these events by Feb. 18.

Beijing independent commentator Ji Feng said the directive was unsurprising.

"Of course they are going to organize things like this," Ji said. "We have seen this countless times before from these people."

He said many people would prefer just to keep a low profile.

"A lot of people aren't willing to say anything nowadays, unless they are forced to by the party," Ji said. "If they aren't roped in to show their loyalty, they would prefer to keep their heads down."

Ji said the Yalu River series is intended to boost patriotism in China, by emphasising the relationship with North Korea.

"This stuff is all aimed at the domestic audience, not the U.S.," he said. "The important thing is the relationship with North Korea."

Compulsory ideology lectures

Guangzhou-based dissident Wang Aizhong said there has also been a nationwide drive to get party members and officials to study party history.

"They [also study] literary works that propagate party ideology, and leaders' speeches," Wang said. "[These sessions] are compulsory."

"The public isn't going to actively do this sort of thing, so the party has to use coercive measures to force them," she said.

Commentators say that a growing personality cult around Xi is also part of the current propaganda strategy, and state media moved into high gear with its praise of his "poverty allevation" campaign this week.

In a ceremony to celebrate his "complete victory" over poverty on Feb. 25, Xi said his successful campaign to eradicate rural poverty was a key success of China's authoritarian socialist system.

"The CCP's leadership and China's socialist system are the fundamental guarantees against risks, challenges and difficulties," Xi told assembled guests in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, where he presented medals to people for their role in the campaign.

He hailed the campaign as a "miracle on earth."

Glorifying Xi

The People's Daily mentioned Xi's name 139 times in a commentary of more than two pages lauding the anti-poverty campaign, Reuters reported.

Chengdu-based rights activist Huang Xiaomin said it was true that the government had invested huge amounts of cash in the most poverty-stricken rural areas, but said the indicators used by the government to measure success weren't easy to map to international standards.

China defines extreme rural poverty as annual per capita income of less than 4,000 yuan (U.S.\$620), or about U.S.\$1.69 a day at current exchange rates, compared with the World Bank's global threshold of U.S.\$1.90 a day, Reuters reported.

"The system they use is independent [of global indicators], and its very vague and highly flexible," Huang said. "I think those wanting to bask in this glory need to think about whether we can maintain these standards over the next few years."

Sanitized history

Xi also lauded the CCP's role in setting up the People's Republic of China and "creating the conditions" for poverty eradication.

However, he didn't mention the famines of late supreme leader Mao Zedong's disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) which are estimated to have left hundreds of millions dead.

Zhou Yuqin, a retired teacher from Shijiazhuang No. 1 Middle School in the northern province of Hebei, said Xi's claims were "ridiculous."

"These claims are ridiculous and inexplicable, both the claim to have comprehensively eliminated poverty in just a few days, and the celebration of victory over the coronavirus," Zhou said.

"They have been manufacturing poverty for the past 70 years [during land reforms, the anti-rightist movement, the Great Leap Forward and the great famines," he said. "They don't mention that, but they still put on this ridiculous and disgusting charade of self-congratulation."

Financial analyst Si Ling said that while there has been a substantial increase in the incomes of rural residents in China, much more remains to be done.

"It's wrong to interpret this increase to mean that the Chinese people have lifted out of poverty, because prices are still rising in China," he said.

"If income doesn't grow faster than inflation, then people are actually getting poorer and poorer," Si said.

Pre-written story

Hong Kong-based media monitor the China Media Project (CMP) said in a recent commentary that the poverty alleviation "victory" had been planned from the outset, regardless of the situation on the ground.

"Like any momentous achievement in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has invested its legitimacy and standing, this victory was always in the cards," CMP founder David Bandurski wrote on Jan. 29. "From the moment Xi Jinping pledged to eradicate poverty in 2015, the story had been written."

"It needed only elaboration – through a vast national network of county and city propaganda offices, and through the dogged work of a media system whose allegiance had already been pledged," he wrote.

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