

Memorable Times

By Bruce Boyes

Spending time with my friends in their home village of Mabao, Shanxi Province, has meant that I've been able to directly experience the significant benefits of two important aspects of Chinese thought. One aspect is the concept of ecological civilization, enshrined in China's Constitution, and the other is the nation's whole-process people's democracy.

Over the course of my visits to my friends residing on the province's Loess Plateau, we spent many days hiking the hills rising up all around the village, visiting my friends' family farming plot and enjoying the beautiful valley views.

The fragile loess landform is highly erodible, and centuries of overuse and overgrazing had led to one of the highest erosion rates in the world—entailing widespread poverty.

Recognizing this, the Chinese Government implemented several major recovery projects with the support of the World Bank. Chinese thought on ecological civilization has seen hundreds of thousands of trees planted on the loess landform, as well as the introduction of grazing management and limits on cropping. At the same time, through whole-process people's democracy, communities have been engaged and empowered in revolutionizing their farming practices and local economies. The ensuing impacts have been profound, achieving not only an astounding level of landscape recovery, but also a doubling of incomes, lifting hundreds of thousands of people out of extreme poverty.

During my stay in Shanxi, I could clearly see how the very notion of



Villagers watch a rehearsal for the village Lantern Festival gala at a theater in Mabao, Shanxi Province, in 2016

ecological civilization has resulted in the stabilization of the landscape, with a dramatic reduction in erosion and a significant increase in the area's flora and fauna. Everywhere we walked, along every track and pathway, trees had been carefully planted. This shows a massive level of commitment.

Whole-process people's democracy means that the village, too, is thriving and beaming with a newfound happiness. This spirit of vitality stood out even more when I witnessed the preparations and performances for two of the annual village Lantern Festival galas. The festival is celebrated 14 days after Chinese New Year and marks the end of the Spring Festival period.

Everybody in the village participates in the galas, be it as a performer, supporting staff or audience member. The performers include everyone: school children, mums and dads, retired seniors, and university students who return to the village for the Spring Festival holidays. My friends, too, are fully immersed in the celebratory preparations as hosts,

performers and helpers.

The end result is a spectacular series of gala shows that are the pride of the village. I was even invited to perform in one of the shows, which I did—very nervously so.

The Lantern Festival galas are performed in a traditional open-air theater, which sits at the heart of the village. In the year between the two galas, the village leadership had secured support to build a new theater for their community, which was proudly inaugurated by the performers and audience.

I had the honor of meeting and interacting with the village chief, truly and genuinely a “person of the people.” He is clearly and passionately devoted to the villagers, and to doing absolutely everything he can to improve their lives. I saw him constantly engaging with everyone, seeking their suggestions, skillfully bringing different views together into consensus, and then putting their ideas into practice. He even asked me for my thoughts about what could be done to help the village have the best possible future. The fantastic experiences I'd had there meant that my immediate suggestion was tourism.

My time in the village was incredibly emotional. The feeling of great hope for the future from walking through a landscape in recovery. Experiencing the warm joy and harmony of a village community that knows that it has a direct pathway into democratic decision-making. Without a single doubt, the best experiences of my life! **BR**

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