In China, 'Once the Villages Are Gone, the Culture Is Gone': [News; Series]

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A common insult in China is to call someone a farmer, a word equated with backwardness and ignorance, while the most valued cultural traditions are elite practices like landscape painting, calligraphy and court music. A mammoth government project has cataloged roughly 9,700 examples nationwide of "intangible cultural heritage," fragile traditions like songs, dances, rituals, martial arts, cuisines and theater.

BEIJING -- Once or twice a week, a dozen amateur musicians meet under a highway overpass on the outskirts of Beijing, carting with them drums, cymbals and the collective memory of their destroyed village. They set up quickly, then play music that is almost never heard anymore, not even here, where the steady drone of cars muffles the lyrics of love and betrayal, heroic deeds and kingdoms lost.

The musicians used to live in Lei Family Bridge, a village of about 300 households near the overpass. In 2009, the village was torn down to build a golf course and residents were scattered among several housing projects, some a dozen miles away.

Now, the musicians meet once a week under the bridge. But the distances mean the number of participants is dwindling. Young people, especially, do not have the time.

"I want to keep this going," said Lei Peng, 27, who inherited leadership of the group from his grandfather. "When we play our music, I think of my grandfather. When we play, he lives."

Across China, cultural traditions like the Lei family's music are under threat. Rapid urbanization means village life, the bedrock of Chinese culture, is rapidly disappearing, and with it, traditions and history.

"Chinese culture has traditionally been rural-based," says Feng Jicai, a well-known author and scholar. "Once the villages are gone, the culture is gone."

That is happening at a stunning rate. In 2000, China had 3.7 million villages, according to research by Tianjin University. By 2010, that figure had dropped to 2.6 million, a loss of about 300 villages a day.

For decades, leaving the land was voluntary, as people moved to the cities for jobs. In the past few years, the shift has accelerated as governments have pushed urbanization, often leaving villagers with no choice but to move.

China's top leadership has equated urbanization with modernization and economic growth. Local governments are also promoting it, seeing the sale of rural land rights as a way to compensate for a weak tax base. Evicting residents and selling long-term leases to developers has become a favored method for local governments to balance budgets and local officials to line their pockets. Numerous local officials are under investigation for corruption linked to rural land sales.

Destroying villages and their culture also reveals deeper biases. A common insult in China is to call someone a farmer, a word equated with backwardness and ignorance, while the most valued cultural traditions are elite practices like landscape painting, calligraphy and court music.

But in recent years, Chinese scholars have begun to recognize the countryside's vast cultural heritage. A mammoth government project has cataloged roughly 9,700 examples nationwide of "intangible cultural heritage," fragile traditions like songs, dances, rituals, martial arts, cuisines and theater. About 80 percent of them are rural.

In the past few years, for example, Mr. Feng has documented the destruction of 36 villages in Nanxian, a county on Tianjin's outskirts, home to a famous center of woodblock printing.

"You don't know if it will survive or not because when they're in their new homes they're scattered," he said. "The knowledge isn't concentrated anymore and isn't transmitted to a new generation."

That is the problem facing the musicians in Lei Family Bridge. The village lies on what used to be a great pilgrimage route from Beijing north to Mount Yaji and west to Mount Miaofeng, holy mountains that dominated religious life in the capital. Each year, temples on those mountains would have great feast days spread over two weeks. The faithful from Beijing would walk to the mountains, stopping at Lei Family Bridge for food, drink and entertainment.

Groups like Mr. Lei's, known as pilgrimage societies, performed free for the pilgrims. Their music is based on stories about court and religious life from roughly 800 years ago and features a call-and-response style, with Mr. Lei singing key plotlines of the story and the other performers, decked out in colorful costumes, chanting back. The music is found in other villages, too, but each one has its own repertoire and local variations that musicologists have only begun to examine.

When the Communists took over in 1949, these pilgrimages were mostly banned, but were revived starting in the 1980s when the leadership relaxed control over society. The temples, mostly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, were rebuilt.

The performers, however, are declining in numbers and increasingly old. The universal allures of modern life -- computers, movies, television -- have siphoned young people away from traditional pursuits. But the physical fabric of the performers' lives has also been destroyed.

One recent afternoon, Mr. Lei walked through the village, now reduced to rubble and overgrown with wild grass and bushes. He started singing with his grandfather when he was 2. He now has

an office job in the city's public transportation company and spends all his vacation time working on the troupe.

"This was our house," he said, gesturing to a small rise of rubble and overgrown weeds. "They all lived in the streets around here. We performed at the temple."

The temple is one of the few buildings still standing. (The Communist Party headquarters is another.) Built in the 18th century, the temple is made of wooden beams and tiled roofs, surrounded by a seven-foot wall. Its brightly painted colors have faded. The weather-beaten wood is cracking in the dry, windy Beijing air. Part of the roof has caved in, and the wall is crumbling.

"It used to be on a list of historic preservation," Mr. Lei said. "The government says it will be rebuilt, but no one seems to know anything."

Government urban-planning officials could not be reached for comment on the village.

Evenings after work, the musicians would meet in the temple to practice. As recently as Mr. Lei's grandfather's generation, the performers could fill a day with songs without repeating themselves. Today, they can sing only a handful. Some middle-aged people have joined the troupe, so on paper they have a respectable 45 members. But meetings are so hard to arrange that the newcomers never learn much, he said, and performing under a highway overpass is unattractive.

"I guess for a lot of us it's a hobby," said Li Lan, 55, a cymbalist and singer. "It's just so inconvenient now to come out here and practice."

Over the past two years, the Ford Foundation underwrote music and performance classes for 23 children from migrant families from other parts of China. Mr. Lei taught them to sing, and to apply the bright makeup used during performances. Last May, they performed at the Mount Miaofeng temple fair, earning stares of admiration from other pilgrimage societies also facing aging and declining membership.

But the project's funding ended over the summer, and the children drifted away.

"I think it's pointless because you have to be from our village to understand how important this is," Mr. Lei said. "Anyway, those children will move somewhere else and won't learn long enough to become real members. It was nice but didn't fix the problem."

One of the oddities of the troupe's struggles is that some traditional artisans now get government support. The government lists them on a national register, organizes performances and offers modest subsidies to some.

Last month, Mr. Lei's group was featured on local television and invited to perform at Chinese New Year activities. Such performances raise about $200 and provide some recognition that what the group does matters.

Du Yang, director of the district office of intangible cultural heritage protection, said the group's music was among 69 protected practices in her district.

"The goal is to make sure these cultural heritages don't get lost," she said. "It would be a great pity if they are lost just as our country is on the road to prosperity."

Mr. Lei said that keeping their village life intact would have helped most.

"It was really comfortable in the old village," he said back in his new home, a small two-bedroom apartment high up in an apartment block a half-hour drive away. "We had a thousand square meters and rented out rooms to migrants from other provinces. Lots of buses stopped nearby, and we could get into the city easily."

Like all rural residents, the Leis and their neighbors never owned their land; all land in China belongs to the state. So when the plans were announced to build the golf course, they had little choice but to move. "No one protested," he said. "We knew we didn't have a choice. You have to just go with the flow."

Everyone got free apartments and $50,000 to $100,000 in compensation.

Strangely, however, the golf course has never been built, and the village still lies in ruins. No one here can figure out if this is because the development was illegal, or perhaps part of a corrupt land deal that is under investigation. Such information is not public, so villagers can only speculate. Mostly, they try to forget.

"I try not to think about these things too much," Mr. Lei said. "Instead, I try to focus on the music and keeping it alive."

Credit: IAN JOHNSON; Mia Li contributed research from Beijing.