Green Revolution
Former revolutionary base becomes a model of ecological restoration
By Wen Qing

Liu Jin, a well-known actor lauded for playing the late Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in many films and TV series, travels all over China to shoot for his different roles. Yan’an, a former revolutionary base of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in Shaanxi Province, stands out for its ecological restoration efforts.

In the following centuries, Yan’an became headquarters of the CPC after the end of the Long March in 1935, attracting swarms of people from across the country to the small city. International observers like Snow also arrived. The CPC implemented a national reforestation project popularly known as “grain for green,” a conservation initiative to reduce soil erosion and improve the degraded ecosystem in the Loess Plateau and other regions. Overexploited fields where grain was grown were allowed to lie fallow and then converted into forests. Today, Yan’an’s vegetation coverage has almost doubled, from 46 percent in 2000 to 81.3 percent in 2017.

Historical necessity
“People avoided wearing white shirts in the 1990s as they would get dirty easily due to the frequent sandstorms,” Tang Kuncai, a former railway worker, said. At that time, Yan’an’s rugged mountains were bare, with almost no trees growing there. On windy days, the air scattered sand and dust over the city and people outside it. Things were even more challenging in an area of Yichuan that was part of the Yellow River Valley. If vegetation could be grown on the slopes, it could arrest soil erosion and lessen sedimentation in the river, Hao said. However, the slopes were very steep and the soil layer was very thin and barren. So the seedlings were transported onto the slopes using wire ropes and to improve their survival rate, were planted in stone pits specially built with additional soil so that they would retain water when it rained. The method worked. Hao pointed to the green slopes, saying, “We have to replant some of the trees as this year it has been very dry. But most of them survived.”

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During the blockade and acute shortage of essential items in the 1940s, the local people and the CPC led a grand tree-planting drive. “Besides receiving subsidies, farmers are also hired by the government to plant trees in state-owned forest farms,” Li said. Some of them have been employed as part-time forest rangers. The growing locust tree forest, a favorite of honey bees, has led to many farmers keeping bees. “Locust flowers have become a new name card of our city,” Hao said.

The Yan’an spirit
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From then on, farmers were encouraged to plant the free saplings provided by the government rather than grow grains on demarcated hillside land. The government compensated the farmers, providing subsidized grain as well as money for the reforested land.

In 1999, while on an inspection tour of Yan’an, then Premier Zhu Rongji proposed to return the grain plots to forests.

However, it was not easy to grow trees in Yan’an’s dry climate conditions. Hao Yunfeng, Deputy Director of the Forestry Bureau of Yichuan, a county in Yan’an, told Beijing Review, “In some cases, trees had to be replanted five or six times.”

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Yan’an has also prohibited grazing on the mountains, as the sheep tend to eat up the baby plants, even digging out the roots. “Sheep herding was one of the main income sources for many farmers,” Li said. “Although they were unhappy with this prohibition, they followed it.”

In 1999, there were 2 million sheep in Yan’an. At present, the number has come down to between 600,000 and 700,000. This sharp reduction has resulted in enormous long-term ecological improvement. In the past two decades, the newly created forest area crossed 1.4 million hectares.

The greening of Yan’an has also led to noticeable improvements in the weather. In the 1990s, the average annual precipitation was 350 mm. Today, it has increased to 600 mm. The soil washed into the Yellow River has decreased to 30 million tons from 258 million tons, and sandstorms have become rare.

Farmers have benefited from the initiative. According to Hao, the afforestation efforts are combined with the poverty alleviation drive. “Besides receiving subsidies, farmers are also hired by the government to plant trees in state-owned forest farms,” Li said. Some of them have been employed as part-time forest rangers. The growing locust tree forest, a favorite of honey bees, has led to many farmers keeping bees. “Locust flowers have become a new name card of our city,” Hao said.

A tourist watches a beekeeper collect honey in Huanglong, a county in Yanan, on June 3, 2018.