

# Domoguen: Dignity

Monday, October 05, 2015

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MOUNTAIN LIGHT

"OUR environment needs protection and farmers need dignity, as does our food."

That is not only an appeal and a declaration needful of action.

Thanks to the Slow Food International, it was the theme of the recently concluded Slow Food Beijing Festival organized from September 23 to 26, 2015 by Slow Food Great China in collaboration with Slow Food International, Beijing Design Week and the Free Trade Zone of Beijing Airport.

So that is what is with China now, the toughest competition, when it comes to good and the worst food you can imagine. Should China focus on good food, it would mean so much to the world.

Slow Food involves millions of people who follow the philosophy of good, clean and fair food.

I learned about this international food network and its advocacies about geographic and distinctively healthy foods almost a decade ago through Mary Hensley of the US Peace Corps, and Eighth Wonder, Inc.

Appreciating the theme while reading the communiqué on my inbox awakens the same realization Mary was trying to bring across to us all these years with regards our heirloom rice.

Mary first came to the Cordillera as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the late 1970s. In one of several encounters with her, I recollect Mary's Cordillera is the same as that of my youth that remains planted in my mind today. While in Bontoc, Mountain Province, some two years ago, we climbed to the top of the mountain. Viewing the bustling capital town of Bontoc Mary just painted how I first saw the town in 1973, while I was yet in high school, with its verdant rice fields all over. Bontoc has been a favorite conference site for the US Peace Corps those years. After her tour in the Peace Corps, Mary was actively engaged in the promotion and development of the Cordillera's rice terraces heirloom rice. Her efforts encouraged awareness about the state of the rice terraces but also challenged local stakeholders to undertake classification activities for the region's heirloom rice varieties, conservation of indigenous cultural management production systems, and development and marketing support.

Among Mary's activities in this journey she blazed are the identification of a local partner organization, the RICE, Inc. headed by Ms. Maria Victoria Garcia. As partners, they conspired with chefs and restaurants in the USA in the organization of food fairs, including an exhibition at the White House, featuring the Cordillera's heirloom rice and its developed food by-products.

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Through Ms. Hensley and Ms. Garcia, several heirloom rice farmers from the Cordillera, who hardly go out of their villages, attended Slow Food International events in Europe. Both ladies were also behind the inclusion of the Cordillera's major heirloom rice varieties in the Slow Food's International Ark of Taste, which was no small feat.

The Ark of Taste is "a collection of small-scale quality productions that belong to the cultures, history and traditions of the entire planet." It certainly took research to generate the credible and useful required information about these products and provided to Slow Food that it also showcases in its Ark of Taste market during sponsored festivals worldwide.

Among others, the other notable events in this awareness thrust was the publication of a center-fold article by Ms. Hensley in the National Geographic. Also, in coordination with Ms. Hensley, the Smithsonian Institute sent Ms. Liz Carlisle, researcher-writer to research on the region's rice terraces. These are efforts meant to highlight the importance of the rice terraces to the survival and dignity of the peoples in the Cordillera, their culture and environmental biodiversity.

It took until today for China to look back into the richness of its caring culture and traditions that are closely associated to environmental protection and the dignity of farmers and food for all.

Nothing highlights this all too important development in China than Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announcement that he would take a "zero-tolerance" stance against violations and crimes of food safety and ensure food safety for the country's people.

According to the Slow Food website, "what promises to be the "most important food safety law in history" will officially come into effect on October 1, 2015."

Let me add these quotes from the Chinese Premier's declaration that we must also consider in apprising ourselves about our rice terraces and food production as a whole. "Our environment needs protection and farmers need dignity, as does our food, its industry, its distribution and perhaps most important of all, its culture, which is important for the Chinese and for the whole world... For this reason we need to preserve nature, continue to produce these foods, and treasure the cultures and traditions that have created them."

We rejoice with the Chinese people for this victory in their quest for environmental protection, and the dignity of their farmers and food production. It makes us shudder why our nation is not taking competitive and strong actions to ensure the dignity of our farmers, our environment and food industries too.

Meanwhile and with our growing circle of friends, I continue to look ahead to that day when the plight of the region's rice terraces farmers and the state of the rice terraces are attended to and given the protection and dignity they deserve. My highest regards and best wishes to Ms. Mary Hensley, Ms. Vicky Garcia, Ms. Daisy Langenegger, Mr. Klaus Schoening and rice farmers in the Cordillera.

Homage

When the sky itself will bend to kiss  
The hem of dear Earth's tattered robe,  
Take heed!  
If heaven stoops to reverence Earth,  
Can we, as men who came from dust,  
Forbear to show a kindred trust?

HEAVEN IS UNDER OUR FEET,  
JOHN MACALEER

**Published in the Sun.Star Baguio newspaper on October 06, 2015.**