

FEATURE

Blind Man and His Armless Friend Spend Years Planting 10,000 Trees in China

A once-barren bank of the Ye river in central China now has 12,000 trees irrigated by a small canal, thanks to unlikely but dedicated gardeners: two friends, one blind and one without arms.

For the past 13 years, the two have planted and watered trees near their village in Hebei province in what originally was supposed to be a commercial venture but became a mission supported by local officials to improve the air in a region more famous for its stifling pollution than for its rolling hills.

The story of Jia Wenqi, 53, with no arms, and his blind friend, Jia Haixia, 54, is one of perseverance, environmental awakening and of finding a path in a country where it is difficult for the disabled to find jobs.

“This empty riverbank was only dry sand and pebbles. It was deserted for many years. For normal people, it was impossible to plant trees there,” Wenqi said in an interview on the riverbank. “But as the saying goes: Nothing is impossible to a willing heart.”

Every morning Haixia grabs onto the empty sleeve of Wenqi, who leads the way to the riverbank and then carries Haixia on his back across the shallow Ye river to their plantation.

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Haixia climbs trees to prune them of branches to be used as cuttings to plant new trees, using his hands to feel for the branches. Wenqi digs holes for the cuttings, tucking a shovel between his cheek and shoulder to aim it and then using his foot to drive it into the ground. He also uses his feet to fetch water from the river with a bucket and pour the water around the newly planted tree.

“Just ask a normal person to work with his arms in his pockets, like Wenqi!” Haixia said. “We handicapped people have an endurance that normal people don’t possess.”



After more than 14 years of hard work, two disabled men have become legends in their village in China’s Hebei Province



People with disabilities are at a substantial disadvantage in China, a highly competitive society where anti-discrimination laws and policies to encourage hiring of disabled people are not enforced.

The two childhood friends share a surname but are not closely related, though they both grew up in Yeli Village, part of the Hebei city of Shijiazhuang.

Unable to find work, they started their venture in 2002 with the modest goal of planting around 800 trees a year. But a drought devastated their first crop, and they have never made any money from the plantation. Instead they get by on modest government assistance for disabled people. However, they have stuck with the tree-planting and now feel they have a purpose: to improve the local environment.

Their village is part of the industrial hub of Shijiazhuang city, which was China's third-worst-polluted city in a list by the Environment Ministry earlier this year. Seven of the top 10 cities on that list were in Hebei province, a heavily industrial and coal-burning province.

People with disabilities are at a substantial disadvantage in China, a highly competitive society where anti-discrimination laws and policies to encourage hiring of disabled people are not enforced. Their unemployment rates are well more than double that of non-disabled people, according to a 2013 report by the International Labor Organization. Income levels for households with disabled people were less than half the average of other households, the report found.



“We handicapped people often feel inferior. No one takes us seriously and we have to depend on ourselves,” the blind man said, his eyes gazing aimlessly.

Haixia lost his eyesight in a work accident in a stone quarry in 2000.

Wenqi was electrocuted at the age of 3 and both arms were amputated. He performed for many years in a travelling troupe of disabled people in which he demonstrated calligraphy written with his feet. Several old photographs of his travels are pinned on the walls of his dusty room in the basement of a house he shares with his brother and sister-in-law.

He left the troupe in 2001 to take care of his dying father.

Wenqi said their tree venture's focus was initially commercial, not environmental. "Gradually, as the trees grew and by watching promotional programs on television, I learnt that planting trees can improve air quality and the whole environment. We grew trees, but we also grew our minds."

Their village committee has given them nearly 7 hectares to plant the trees, and the local forestry bureau has chipped in with some tree seedlings.

"Our tree planting may not have much substantial benefit for the present generation, but it leaves a green environment to the next one," Haixi said. "We are physically disabled but mentally healthy. We have this big dream in our heart to leave a stretch of green to our children."