

# Forests Grow Out Of Determination

By Wen Chihua

BEIJING—When Niu Yuqin planted eight spindly saplings in 1985 on a hillside above her farmstead in Jingbian, a county on the edge of the desert in the north of Shaanxi Province, all she wanted was to provide some shade for her son as he watched the flock.

She never thought then that she would continue to plant trees 15 years later. Or that she would lead an army of sorts to build a “Great Green Wall” to stop the spread of the desert.

Since she planted the first eight saplings, Yuqin estimates that her efforts have led to the greening of about 3,335 hectares (8,235 acres) of barren land. Her work has been recognised by many and she has also been given a number of awards for her pioneering work. Yuqin was invited by the Secretariat of the International Treaty of Desert Prevention to speak at its International Ecology Conference and she was also given an award by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization for her work.

Despite the recognition, Yuqin is extremely modest about her achievements. Says she, “I just wanted my little boy to have a place to escape from the searing sunlight while he tended the sheep.”

According to Yuqin, she realised



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early on that a small family action duplicated and carried out on a large scale could help the lives of poor farmers eking out a living in the desert-like region. Even the defence provided by the crumbling remains of the Ming Dynasty Great Wall (1368-1644) which crosses the county is not enough to stop the drifting sands blown south from the Ordos Desert choking what scrub vegetation there was in the region.

Though Yuqin’s efforts are now hailed as a big success, she has had to pay a price for it. Working outdoors in the dry, harsh climate has taken its toll on her appearance and her complexion is more weather-beaten than most. And in 1987, her husband with whom she had begun the back-breaking work,

died of bone cancer at a young age.

But by then Zhang Jaiwang and Yuqin had planted 667 hectares with young saplings and after losing her husband Yuqin worked even harder to fulfil his wish that she carry on. “When he died I felt as if the sky had fallen down on me. I also felt that our dream of greening the desert was slipping away with him,” she says.

Jaiwang was so dedicated to their mission that he named their grandson “Jilin,” which literally means ‘continue tree planting.’ The child is still too young to understand the meaning of his name, but all around him Grandfather’s dream is being carried out. Since 1991, Yuqin and her family members have covered

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people rent larger fields and sell half the yield and use the other half for personal use. Those who do not have land or have little of it buy local vegetables and go somewhere else to sell them," she adds.

For those women who do not have their own farms, survival is tough. Says Iryna Ivashchenko, "In our village Gorodyshche, all the women go to the forests to pick mushrooms in summer. We dry them and sell them in winter. But it is impossible to survive without a vegetable garden. There may be mushrooms and berries but if you have a farm you can also breed a pig or keep hens to get both meat and money."

To make matters worse, 40 percent of the villagers do not understand the reform process initiated by organisations like the Council of Women Farmers of Ukraine. So, the Council is hoping to be able to give information about management, marketing and policy and provide assistance in professional development and strengthening of women's businesses in villages.

Despite the lack of social infrastructure, difficult labour conditions and inadequate health care and educational facilities, Klebanova feels that her organisation has been able to achieve one major thing: giving credit to farming. According to her, farming is now being considered the most progressive type of ownership and economy in villages. Achieving more, she feels, is just a question of time.

Source: Women's Feature Service, 23 May 2000

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more than 2,700 hectares of barren hills with poplar and elm saplings.

In 1991, Yuqin was given 9,000 yuan (US\$107) by the provincial forestry department to carry forward her mission. After visiting her husband's grave and thinking hard how she should use the money, she decided to expand her work by building a primary school in the village, and putting in her own savings of 10,000 yuan (US\$119) for good measure.

Yuqin is not educated and only learned to write her own name because many admirers ask for her autograph. Today, as principal of the Wang-Qin Primary School (named after her and her husband's given names), Yuqin teaches children the importance of ecological protection and leads them in planting trees themselves.

Yuqin also has another achievement to her credit. While leasing the land-use rights of 11,529 acres of semidesert land and employing local people, Yuqin has also set up a company which produces farm, forestry and animal products. On an average, this operation has been making yearly profits of 400,000 yuan (US\$ 48,000) in recent years.

However, despite being the owner of a company and also having amassed plenty of money, the biggest source of happiness for Yuqin is still the number of trees that she has planted and continues to plant to green the desert.

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