

GreenFootprint



Yu Xiaolan stands on a mountain, once barren, in the northwestern tip of North China's Shanxi province.

SUN RUISENG / CHINA DAILY

DREAM MOVES MOUNTAINS

TRANSPLANTED SOUTHERNER NURTURES TREES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS IN SHANXI

By LAN TIAN, CHINA DAILY

There is an old Chinese story about a man called Grandpa Silly, whose trips to and from home were made extremely difficult by two high mountains in front of his house. So he gathered his family together and started to level the mountains. His neighbor scoffed at him. "Don't be silly. You are too old and weak to level even a small hill, let alone two big mountains." But the old man said, "I have sons, and my sons have sons, and I will have endless progeny, but the mountains won't grow any higher." Grandpa Silly's determination inspired the God of Heaven, who sent two immortals to move the mountains away. Like many Chinese, Yu Xiaolan learned the story of Grandpa Silly as a child, but little did she think it was laying out a future path for her, or that more than three decades later she would be referred to as a modern day Grandpa Silly.

Yu, a city dweller born and raised in Yunnan province, moved to her new husband's village in 1989.

Nancuijiayao village in the northwestern tip of Shanxi province lies about 100 kilometers south of the Mu Us Desert.

Centuries of deforestation had stripped away its vegetation, eroded its soil and allowed the desert to encroach on the

Loess Plateau where the village sits.

"The strong northwest wind blew all year round. In the morning, it was hard to push the door open as it had been blocked by sand from outside. The dust also blocked the sunlight, people had to light oil lamps during the day," said the 45-year-old Yu, recalling her early days in the village.

Life was difficult. They lived in a house

cut out of a cave and slept on a bed made of mud and bricks. They opened a butcher shop and grew mushrooms.

In 1992, when the county government encouraged people to plant trees on uncultivated hills, Yu immediately signed a contract for 270 hectares.

"As a southerner, I always dreamed of bringing the green of my hometown to the hills here," Yu said. "Besides, we could also make a living out of growing trees."

Yu and her husband then began their greening campaign. They blasted rock from hillsides to raise retaining walls, brought in soil and planted shrubs to bind the soil together.

They planted 5,000 apple trees in the first year. Tens of thousands of poplars, pine trees and apricot trees were planted in the following years.

To irrigate them, Yu, who stands a modest 150 cm tall and weighs 45 kg, has to carry water from the foot of the hills to the summit more than 50 times a day.

With an average temperature of 4 C and drought prevailing almost every year, half of the saplings will not survive.

Local villagers could not understand why a southern woman was so determined to plant trees on barren hills.

But years later, they joined her effort. She has now planted more than 600,000 trees on 670 hectares of the once rocky and barren land.

Over the past decade, the once naked hills have become a sea of green. Even the wind is muted and dust is less than before. With improvements in the environment, fruit trees and livestock grow better.

In addition to selling saplings, Yu and her husband also make money from the cashmere and wool they get from their 300 sheep raised on the green mountains.

With an annual income of more than 30,000 yuan (\$4,400), they are able to send their 11-year-old son to a primary school in the county to give him a better education.

Yu said she did consider giving up and going back to Yunnan in the early years.

"But where there is love, there is home," Yu said in an accent mixing the local and her own southern dialect.

Thanks to encouragement and financial support from the local government, the county's forest coverage has increased to more than 50 percent over the past decades, while 90 percent of its land undergoing desertification has been brought under control.

This year, Yu has planted another 10,000 pine trees. Only 5,000 survived due to drought, but she is determined to continue.

"The trees that survive will be green gold for future generations," she said.