

# Blind man, armless friend plant thousands of trees in China

By Helene Franchineau  
The Associated Press

**Y**ELI VILLAGE, 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 cedar 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. 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."

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 per 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 planting trees 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

**PLANTING FOR THE FUTURE.** Jia Wenqi, left, uses his foot to lift a bucket of water as his friend, Jia Haixia, stands nearby in Yeli village near Shijiazhuang city in northern China's Hebei province. For the past 13 years, Jia Wenqi, who has no arms, and Jia Haixia, who is blind, have worked together to plant and water more than 12,000 trees near their village. (AP Photo/Helene Franchineau)

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 three 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 seven 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," Haixia 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."

## Cambodia welcomes home 10th-century statue of a Hindu god

By Sopheng Cheang  
The Associated Press

**P**HNOM PENH, Cambodia — Cambodia has welcomed home a 10th-century stone statue of a Hindu god that was looted from a temple during the country's civil war and spent the past three decades at an American museum.

The sculpture of monkey god Hanuman was formally handed over at a ceremony in Phnom Penh attended by government officials and the director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, which acquired the sculpture in 1982.

"If Hanuman were alive, we would see a smile on his face showing his joy at being here among us where he belongs," deputy prime minister Sok An said at the ceremony in the Office of the Council of Ministers.

The statue was stolen from the Prasat Chen Temple in the Koh Ker temple complex in Siem Reap province, which is also home to the famed Angkor Wat temples, said Sok An, adding that it was shipped to Europe and then the U.S.

"Now, after his long journey, he is finally back home," said Sok An, who praised the museum's initiative in returning the statue and called on others "to follow the example of returning plundered treasures to their rightful owners."

Officials at the Cleveland museum found last year that the statue's head and body were sold separately in 1968 and 1972 during the Vietnam War and the Cambodian civil war. An excavation showed the sculpture's



**RIGHTFUL RETURN.** A 10th-century Cambodian sandstone statue is seen inside the Council Ministry during a ceremony in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The Cleveland Museum of Art this month handed it to Cambodia after it uncovered evidence that the sculpture was probably looted during the country's civil war. (AP Photo/Heng Sinith)

base matched a pedestal at the ancient temple.

"As more and more information came to light, we became firmly convinced that the sculpture belongs here," said William Griswold, the director of the Cleveland museum. He said that when the museum acquired the piece, its connection with the Koh Ker temple was "far from certain."

The Hanuman is the sixth "blood antiquity" returned to Cambodia in recent years. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York returned two, and one antique has been returned each from Sotheby's auction house, Christie's auction house, and the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California.

Their returns mark steps to bringing back together nine figures that once formed a tableau in a tower

of the temple. The scene captured a famous duel in Hindu mythology in which the warrior Duryodhana is struck down by his cousin Bhima at the end of a bloody war of succession while seven attendants look on.

"We in Cleveland have been fortunate to benefit from the presence of Hanuman for more [than] 30 years," Griswold said.

The sculpture was displayed constantly at the museum since its acquisition, and was a favorite among schoolchildren who imitated its kneeling pose during tours.

"He has taught visitors to our museum about the glories of Khmer civilization," Griswold said. "While he will be sorely missed in the United States, we rejoice in his return."

Associated Press writer Jocelyn Gecker in Bangkok contributed to this report.

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