

# A miracle sprouts in the Ordos desert

After more than 30 years turning deserts green, Yin Yuzhen, a farmer in Ordos, Inner Mongolia autonomous region, can see the miracle.

She and her family have planted approximately 60,000 trees in recent years across more than 4,000 hectares of what was once barren land deep in the heart of the Maowusu Desert, among the largest of its kind in the country.

“There has been a dramatic change in my home from decades ago,” the 52-year-old told Chinese media.

In 1985, reassured by her father, she left her hometown in neighboring Shaanxi province and married Bai Wanxiang in Uxin Banner, an administrative unit under Ordos. But, she was depressed about what she had to face – a wilderness of wind, sandstorms and seemingly endless deserts.

A sandstorm might last for more than a month in the desert area. Sand blanketed everything and darkened Yin’s life. Anyone caught in the storm was coated with sand. Even mouths and noses didn’t escape, she recalled.

At that time “the area was bleak and desolate, and no visitors would be seen for weeks”, Yin said, adding that the nearest neighbor lived 20 kilometers away.

An occasional stranger passing by would excite her, she said. To keep the visitor’s footprint in the sand, she put an upside-down basin on it. “When I had spare time, I liked to look at it, as if it were my family,” she said.

To survive the misery, Yin decided to plant trees.

“I’d rather die of exhaustion from planting than be bullied by sand,” she said.

In 1986, she and her husband spent their extra money – earned by doing odd jobs – on 600 new saplings. They planted the trees around their house and tended them daily.

Fewer than 10 of the trees survived the droughts and winds. But, this didn’t defeat the couple. They held on tight to a glimmer of hope. If even one tree could withstand the environment, it would mean that a larger group could also succeed, she said.

Later, the couple purchased thousands of small poplar saplings from a faraway nursery and carried them home on the backs of three cows. After the saplings were planted, most were swept away by yet another sandstorm.

Yin learned a lesson from the failure, concluding that brush needed to grow before the saplings were planted to shield them from the wind.

To date, the plantation has expanded to thousands of hectares and has drawn

various birds and animals.

Inspired by her story, neighbors joined in the environmental effort. Currently, more than 240 families have tree plantations of at least 20 hectares each in Uxin Banner. The green coverage in the region has increased to 85 percent today from 45 percent 10 years ago.

Acclaimed as heroes for their afforestation efforts, Yin and her husband are thronged annually by visitors, despite being tucked away deep in the desert.

Volunteers from China and other countries, including the United States, Germany, France and Republic of Korea, have helped them to plant their trees.

Her persistent fight against desertification has won her a series of honors, including the Gaia Prize, which was granted in the ROK. She has received awards or given lectures in more than 10 countries and regions as she has campaigned for environmental protection.