

A Tibetan grows a forest in the desert

“Some trees just did not grow well, even if I watered them, trimmed them, applied fertilizers, and took care of them meticulously. So, sometimes I got angry at the trees, and I talked to them now and then. I even wished that I could bring them home for round-the-clock care,” Bianjiu, who opened and operated the first private nursery garden in Zhanang County of Shannan Prefecture in China’s Tibet Autonomous Region, recalled the difficulties along the way, with his dark skin and firm eyes shining under the sun.



Bianjiu stands in his nursery garden in Zhanang County of Shannan Prefecture in China’s Tibet Autonomous Region. [Photo by Zhang Jiaqi/ China.org.cn]

Born in 1959 into a poor family in Zhanang County, Bianjiu grew up as a shepherd boy with deep affection towards the trees. “When I saw the leaves fall from the trees, the idea of planting trees came to me.” In his teens, he always took some saplings back and planted them in his neighborhood after herding the goats by a mountain nearby.

With the start of forest protection along the Yarlung Zangbo River around 1990, Bianjiu started his career of building up cabins for forest rangers together with another 12 people from low-income families, and he offered to plant trees along the river.

His hard work in construction and forestry was acknowledged by the Forestry Bureau of Shannan Prefecture, which granted him the chance to contract two nursery gardens covering a total area of over 25 hectares to plant trees for the forestry authority.

After grading the land, digging wells, and building up ditches and cabins for

forest rangers, the nursery gardens yielded satisfactory results in the following few years through his efforts. And then, a bold idea came up in Bianjiu's mind. From 2000 onwards, Bianjiu began to think over establishing a nursery garden on the sandy land in his neighborhood, a county by the middle stream of the Yarlung Zangbo River.

The chance arrived four years later when the Forestry Bureau of Shannan Prefecture planned to allocate a total of 600,000 yuan to the afforestation of sterile land in the prefecture. Bianjiu's hometown was located in a sandy and barren area where trees could hardly grow.

Attempts had been made to afforest the area time after time, but produced unsatisfactory results. Bianjiu shouldered the challenging task to afforest his hometown and with another 200,000 yuan or so of his own, he opened his nursery garden covering over 13 hectares of land in 2004.

Bianjiu dedicated himself to the nursery garden and found 56 types of trees suitable for this type of terrain. After grading the land, digging wells and setting up three greenhouses, he purchased the saplings from different places in person and attended to them carefully together with the other workers.

Despite his working experience in forestry projects and construction, things did not go completely smoothly. The unstable voltage and power failures became a headache for him. Without a constant supply of electricity, it was hard to pump up the underground water to irrigate the saplings. "I had to drive a tractor to the riverside, and collect the water with barrels with the other workers. Usually, we came back and forth on the four-kilometer road around 12 times in a day," Bianjiu recalled.

Doubts also spread among the people in his neighborhood. Could trees really grow on the barren land? In rainy days, the rain would cause stones to fall down to where he planted trees, which was rather dangerous. Many people tried to persuade Bianjiu out of what he was doing, but he insisted on persevering.

Bianjiu's affection to the trees and his hard work finally paid off. After a decade of devotion, the nursery garden had expanded to over 26 hectares containing more than two million trees. Its annual production amounted to over 400,000 trees, worth over two million yuan.

"Nature is a treasure," Bianjiu knows well about this truth. He found treasure among the trees and a better ecological environment, and at the same time, he did not forget to share the treasure with the poor people in his neighborhood.

As more people saw the trees growing on the sandy land as well as the ecological and economic benefits the trees brought with them, they joined in Bianjiu, and honoured him as "the father of trees".

Now, Bianjiu's nursery garden has offered full-time jobs for 76 workers, and part-time posts for around 200 people. He gave 60,000 yuan to Nuzong, who came from a low-income family to build his house in 2002, and he also offered three relocated poor families water to use.

For those who would like to contribute to afforestation projects in their hometown but lack sufficient funds, Bianjiu offered them free saplings under a "contract" that "nothing will be charged if the saplings survive three years later, while double will be charged if the saplings die of poor care during the three years."

With the efforts of many pioneers like Bianjiu over the past decades, a green corridor 160 kilometers long and 1.8 kilometers wide on average has stood along the Yarlung Zangbo River.

As for the future of the nursery garden, Bianjiu has his plan: "I'd like to build the nursery garden into a place where the public can gather here and have picnics, so that more people can enjoy the pleasantness brought by the trees."

While the 59-year-old with deep sentiments towards trees has never thought of stopping this career which will benefit future generations, he was more than glad that his second son Luobu is willing to inherit his career and carry it forward.