



WANG YONGXIAN (above) is Communist Party secretary of Longbaoshan (Dragon Treasure Mountain) village, now under threat from the Heavenly Desert sand dunes 70 km from Beijing. Chinese patriots (left) display giant PRC flags on the dunes. A section of the dunes near Longbaoshan has been turned into a desert amusement park by an enterprising local businessman. Tourists are still few and far between, but the dunes have become a popular spot to shoot everything from music videos to kung fu spectacles. This one was for MTV. ALL PHOTOS BY CALUM MCELROD

# China's shifting sands close in on Beijing

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**B**ELONGING  
MOTHER NATURE has got it in for Wang Yongxian. In 1988, the farmer fled his hillside cave when flooding triggered landslides on Dragon Treasure Mountain, 70 km north of Beijing. Forced to abandon their traditional cave homes, Wang and neighbors moved down to the safety of the plain. Or so they hoped. Today, a creeping 10-km sand dune threatens to swallow their rebuilt village and set Wang on the run again.

was depressingly familiar to Wang Yongxian. If the winds blow, his family huddles indoors to escape skin-scarring storms that stunt the growth of their sweet-corn and fruit-tree seedlings and lower future yield. When a dozen destructive sandstorms hit Beijing last year, the most severe onslaught for half a century, the central government finally recognized the urgency of the situation.

Visiting Wang's village last May on an emergency inspection of Hebei Province and Inner Mongolia, China's plain-talk Premier Zhu Rongji voiced concerns

main as poor as they are now, then the vegetative cover will still be ruined." Nowhere is this more evident than in Northwest China, home to most of China's desert and source of many of the worst sandstorms. After decades of state-sponsored environmental destruction, when massive earth-moving campaigns reshaped the face of China, the state is trying to remedy past mistakes and cope with new problems. Economic freedom in recent years has permitted families to increase their herds, despite overgrazing, and plant dry areas with inappropriate but high-profit crops like

to strip the local habitat bare.

Jim Liu, of the Television Trust for the Environment, has documented the odds at Alexa in the film "A Line in the Sand," to be aired on BBC World's "Earth Report" and throughout China later this year. "The local people say, 'It used to rain on cloudy days, but now even if it gets cloudy it doesn't rain,' even if it gets cloudy it doesn't rain," even if it gets cloudy it doesn't rain," even if it gets cloudy it doesn't rain."

The runoff from Alexa's Black River has dropped dramatically in recent years, forcing farmers and herders to drain the two ancient reservoirs underground water under the local government seat in Bayanhot. One of

every Chinese into people's common nationwide, even on the grasslands. "The resettlement areas are controversial," says Liu, "but better than having the whole ecosystem destroyed by illiterate herders who raise thousands of animals for status, not subsistence. Their lives will not improve if you leave them out goat-herding."

While experts warn that tree planting is also no panacea for desertification and forest maintenance and the dangers of insufficient biodiversity, afforestation remains the concept and cause best calculated to win public support. In 2001, China's "Forest

people's Congress, in facing the crisis by enacting and drafting the nation's first law on desert control. Existing laws touch on desertification, but none have dealt head-on with root causes such as logging and land reclamation. If it is implemented locally, the law should lend legislative muscle to China's vague but ambitious targets: to bring desertification "locally under control" within 15 years; to contain the "overall sand invasion" by 2010; and to bring all desert areas "under control" by 2050. The law may also speed up the resettlement program, but even these new "development areas" may prove only temporary unless China can reverse its water crisis.

## China's shifting sands close in on Beijing

MOTHER NATURE has got it in for Wang Yongxian. In 1988, the farmer fled his hillside cave when flooding triggered landslides on Dragon Treasure Mountain, 50 miles north of Beijing. Forced to abandon their traditional homes, Wang and his neighbours moved down to the safety of the plain. Or so they hoped. Today, a creeping six-mile sand dune threatens to swallow their rebuilt village and set Wang on the run again.

"There was very little sand when we settled here," explains the 40-year-old farmer, who serves as Communist Party secretary to an embattled community of almost 700 people. But now the 90ft dune that chokes their lungs and stifles their crops looms large just 100 yards away, and closes in by 10 yards a year.

"Look at it now, it's right before our eyes!" says Wang.

Like Wang, the Chinese government has just woken up to an ecological disaster. Nearly one-third of China's territory - 50,000 villages and hundreds of cities - is plagued by rampant desertification. The danger is greatest in north China, where deserts eat up vast quantities of land a year. The crisis has prompted concerns that China's capital must retreat from Beijing to a safer location.

"Environmental destruction is very severe," admitted Luo Bin, desertification expert at the State Forestry Administration, the vanguard body fighting to slow the sands. "So many areas have sacrificed the environment for economic development. Vegetative cover grows worse and worse as people waste water resources, plant inappropriate crops and over-graze the grasslands. No country on earth has put such funding into building ecosystems as China, but we have many people and little land."

China is among the countries worst affected by the global problem of desertification. Its 1.3 billion people survive on just one quarter of the worldwide per capita average of arable land and fresh water resources. Despite mass tree-planting campaigns to build a "Green Great Wall", deserts already smother 27 per cent of China's landmass, and are expanding by more than 2,460 square kilometres every year. Next month, China's cabinet will release new figures expected to post a significantly faster rate of expansion, while the parliament drafts China's first law on desert control.

And China's own problem is going global. Earlier this month, the Japanese, Korean and Chinese governments met in Tokyo to launch joint projects tackling the Chinese sandstorms that darken the skies of Seoul and other Asian cities every spring. Just last week, a massive sandstorm originating in the **Gobi** desert rose seven miles into the atmosphere, charged over the Pacific and halfway across North America.

The haze was news over Denver, but depressingly familiar to Wang Yongxian. But when a dozen destructive sandstorms hit Beijing last year - the most severe onslaught for half a century-the government finally heeded the urgency of the situation.

Visiting Wang's village on an emergency inspection last May, China's plain-talking Premier Zhu Rongji voiced concerns that the Chinese capital may eventually be forced away from Beijing. Party spin doctors quickly prohibited Chinese journalists from printing Zhu's fears, lest they damaged the city's bid for the 2008 Olympic Games. The premier later made a televised call to arms to fight the sandy foe, without singling out Beijing's peril.

A carpet of wind-borne **Gobi** desert sand - and the accompanying prospect of lungfuls of sandy air - will horrify the world's sprinters. Government experts, however, are quick to play down the threat.

"I tell the premier `don't worry, there's no need to move the capital!'" says Professor Shi Peijun, chief consultant on China's anti-desertification initiative who, additionally, told The Independent on Sunday: "We must combine desertification control with poverty alleviation. If you can control the sand but people remain so poor, then the vegetative cover will still be ruined." The vast dune shadowing Wang's home shows the problem is creeping closer to home. Fully-fledged deserts just 100 miles from Beijing are advancing at two miles a year.

But experts like Prof Shi agree the key battles of China's war with nature lie in blighted areas such as inner Mongolia's Alxa ("Alashan" in Mandarin).

The grassland of Genghis Khan's descendants has degenerated into desert, expanding by 600 square miles a year through population pressure, over-grazing and shrinking rivers.

John Liu, of the Television Trust for the Environment, has documented the crisis at Alxa in the film A Line in the Sand, to be aired on BBC World's Earth Report, and throughout China, later this year. "The grassland is a very fragile ecosystem which can easily collapse into desert," Mr Liu explains. "This is the frontline. If you keep pulling back, then the frontline will come to you." But he is not entirely pessimistic. "Perhaps it is good that the Chinese are on the frontline. They are survivors and will try anything."

Innovations being tested include blasting grass seeds into outer space to mutate into desert-resistant varieties. The idea is not as far fetched as it sounds. Giant, space mutated, vegetables are already on sale in the streets of Shanghai.

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