

Armless Wenqi Jia and blind Haixia Jia spent fifteen years planting a forest in Jingxing County, Hebei Province, only to watch it destroyed overnight by a flood. It is a story of struggle against fate—a Hebei version of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Yet the flavor of their everyday lives, with all their trivialities, may in fact be the better story.



The Armless Man, the Blind Man, the Ducks, and the White Storks

ONE Lab, February 23, 2017

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Originally published in Chinese; English translation by the author.

Prequel to the Blind Man

Twenty years ago, a flood washed away the trees in Yeli Village; twenty years later, another flood struck. Haixia Jia witnessed the first one, but not the second.

Like most men in Yeli Village, he had once worked in the coal mines. He was born with a cataract in his left eye—no vision, only a faint sense of light—and relied on his right eye for work. Then came a gas explosion that left burns over 80 percent of his body. He was issued a disability certificate and, once healed, transferred to a quarry to do blasting work. In October 2000, *on an ordinary day with no mistakes made*, a shard of rock inexplicably flew more than sixty meters and pierced his good eye. He was blinded completely. Doctors filled the cavity with silicone oil, leaving his eyes looking brighter than most, though they no longer saw.

In those first days of blindness, he was trapped in bed, lying motionless through day and night, thinking of nothing. Later he would recall that *it felt like what people call Alzheimer's*. At times he wanted to die, and even tried, but soon realized that as a blind man he was incapable of ending his life. He could not find the pesticide or rope his wife had hidden away. Once those days passed, he began to think through the fates of the other disabled people in the village. Many of their wives had left them—something he accepted as normal. *“A woman is an appendage to a man,”* he said. *“If she can't cling to you, she leaves.”*

Even today, Haixia's wife admits she was the one who insisted on marrying him. Though he had no money, no friends, a reputation for fighting, and even a stint in prison, he had one quality she prized: he was no pushover.

Her parents opposed the marriage, but she packed a few clothes and moved in with him. For that, she paid dearly: every time she became pregnant, her parents dragged her to the county clinic for an abortion. They blamed Haixia for their daughter's suffering. But once a woman makes up her mind, she does not turn back. She believed her husband's words: *“Having a child is like smuggling drugs—you may fail nine times, but if you succeed once, you've succeeded.”*

In the sweltering summer of 1996, before the flood, she was pregnant again. To ease the heat, Haixia bought her an electric fan—rare in the village. The fan caught the attention of

both families. Her parents guessed she was expecting, while his parents came to seize the fan and furniture. To protect his wife and the fan, Haixia raised a cleaver and slashed at his own wrist. Decades later, he still took pride in the line he shouted: *"You gave me life, Father. I return it to you. But the fan is mine."* The blow went astray; it was nothing serious for Haixia, but his wife, terrified, miscarried in the bathroom. That episode, along with all that came before, severed ties with both families.

The flood that year swept away the entire grove Wenqi Jia had planted since dropping out of junior high. He had lost both arms at the age of three, when he grabbed a live wire, and now he was dealt another blow. The flood also ruined the house Haixia was renting; when the waters receded, it leaned 45 degrees toward the river. Yet Haixia had reached the high point of his life: on May 9, 1997, after several failed pregnancies, his wife gave birth to their son—at that time he could still see, and he witnessed the whole moment.

As he recounted these stories, his wife bustled in and out of the living room, her head full of small curls springing with every step. The room was tall and bare, like a frozen image of a family that might have become prosperous but instead had fallen into lasting poverty. The cloth curtains leading to the bedrooms were so worn they had turned into lace, curling in the cross-breeze. Outside, she sold *spicy skewers in broth* (known in China as *mala tang*) at the village entrance. She was loading the gas canister and the unnaturally bright skewers onto a tricycle in the yard. *"Time to open the stall,"* she said.

Haixia ignored her, as if the person he was describing so vividly were someone else.

"Such fun, such fun," he said. For an entire afternoon and a half he recounted the days when he and his wife fought side by side, performing the scenes as if in a classroom role-play. He held a cigarette the whole time, but lit it only twice, taking a puff or two before stubbing it out. Just when it seemed the talk might last forever, he went flat, *like a battery drained*. He rushed through the next twenty years: he and his wife nearly broke apart, but as they grew older, they settled back into each other's lives.

It was during those nights in darkness, thinking through the fates of the disabled in his village, that Haixia remembered his old classmate Wenqi.

Visiting that classmate was the first time he ventured out alone after losing his sight. He had no wish to join the circle of blind men in the village, and refused to carry a white cane. On the way, a downhill slope nearly killed him. Wenqi welcomed him warmly, offering one disabled man's comfort to another. Haixia never did recall his classmate's face, but he felt better. Out of courtesy, he asked about Wenqi's life and learned that he had started planting trees again. "*And what if the floods come back?*" he asked. Wenqi went inside and returned with a book.

"*The I Ching*," he said, as if he had written it himself.

He claimed that the hexagrams matched the county annals perfectly: floods came "*in years of three and six*"—the third year of Xianfeng, the sixth year of the Republic, 1963, and 1996. He had calculated that for the next twenty years there would be no flood. The next one, he said, would not arrive until 2016 at the earliest.

Haixia could not tell if Wenqi truly understood the book or was just performing his brand of mysticism. Planting trees was not his only pursuit—he also told fortunes and gave names.

In the new world of the disabled that Haixia had just entered, Wenqi was a figure of some admiration. As a young man without arms, he had stirred rivalries among several girls in the village. One even became pregnant by him, only for him to demand she abort the child. His swagger stunned the teenage Haixia. "*Since ancient times, heroes have had beauties*," Wenqi had said. "*And she wasn't beautiful.*" Thirty years later, the same Wenqi was still in Yeli Village, living alone in a crumbling cottage, going nowhere, doing nothing.

That afternoon, Wenqi asked Haixia if he wanted to plant trees together. Haixia agreed. *Better, he thought, than waiting for his wife to abandon him.*

Later Wenqi said he had only stepped in to demand compensation for Haixia out of sympathy for the disadvantaged. For days beforehand he smeared ointment around Haixia's damaged eye, using up half a tube, warning him not to wash. By the time they set off for the quarry, the eye was gooey, stinking, oozing fluid, just as Wenqi had intended. He told the quarry boss the eye was rotting into the brain and that it would be best to pay a lump sum and walk away. "*Give him forty-five thousand, give me ten, and I'll convince him.*

Fifty-five in total, and it's settled.” Later, Wenqi boasted, *“I acted it so well.”* He gave all the money to Haixia.

And so the blind man joined the armless man in the work of planting trees.



▲ Wenqi carried Haixia across the river to the grove

White Storks Spread Their Wings

The division of labor developed naturally. The armless man carried the blind man across the river at its narrowest point, stepping from one stone to another, the rocks *as slick as if smeared with soap*. Once across, they inspected the branches one by one, pulling out the dead and planting fresh cuttings. The armless one chose where to plant, while the blind one used a hammer and steel chisel to punch holes in the piles of cobblestones. However practiced, driving a chisel into stones meant striking his own hand again and again. Fifteen years later, the scars on his hands looked like patches sewn on cloth, speckled as if with a skin disease.

The branches were stolen from neighboring villages. The armless one stood guard and directed from below, while the blind one climbed the trees to chop off the chosen twigs. The survival rate of these branches was abysmally low, but they had no money for seedlings.

Most of the first batch withered; only five or six sprouted new leaves. Haixia touched those leaves the way he touched the head of his four-year-old son—*gently, afraid too much touch would kill them*. Once, he even wiped his eyes afterward.

From that moment, Wenqi noticed something about his partner. What city people might call “sensitive” was in Yeli dismissed as “*like a woman*.” He thought: *this man has lived through too few failures*.

The last time Wenqi had cried was back in middle school. He was a good student—remarkably so, given his condition—but the homeroom teacher told him to quit, because the boys who helped pull up his pants after he used the toilet had grown tired of it. Wenqi shut himself in his room for a week and invented a small pulley system. Strapped to his shoulders, with kite string threaded through his belt loops, he could bite down and pull his trousers up. From then on there was nothing he could not manage. But Haixia could manage very little; almost everything defeated him. He had a large, deep pond, yet insisted he couldn’t raise fish because his bad eyes couldn’t watch over them, so the pond lay idle.

The work in the grove wasn’t difficult, just endless. Haixia did well enough. Sometimes the plants reminded him of their vitality: a branch that had collapsed limply on the rocks would stand upright the next day after being watered.

Part of the important labor was driving off the goats. To them, goats were like *giant white mosquitoes*—hovering, persistent, impossible to shoo away. They circled the grove with the shepherd, sprawled on scorching cobblestones in 40-degree heat, then charged in to gnaw the branches. For the two men, goats were mortal enemies: when the goats were on duty, so were they.

But worse than goats was *lalacai*, the strangling grass. Wenqi once showed me the spectacle of a tree thirty centimeters thick choked to death. The vines spread in waves like green fabric, swallowing trees *like a river*. Many things only the two of them knew. Plant a tree, and the tree would bring more. Poplars grew a meter a year: “*By the second year they spread their arms wide, cast a stretch of shade, and that patch turned damp—then you could plant further forward*.” Within five years the crowns of neighboring trees nearly touched, crisscrossing to form a complete canopy.



▲ Wenqi fetching water from the stream

At first the grove grew more slowly than Haixia had imagined; later it grew faster than he ever expected. After crossing the river, the light gradually receded, shade palpable even to his arms. One day in the forest, the glow before his eyes disappeared. He knew then the trees had taken. He walked here, walked there—it was all dark. “*No gaps,*” he said. When you become disabled, everywhere you go you must play the guest; if you look too at ease, people will take offense. But in the forest, he forgot he was a guest.

Haixia always returned to the grove, like a pigeon homing at dusk.

Only twice in his life did he feel deep regret over his blindness. One of them was on the high school stage where his son, Lining Jia, was performing. By then the two partners were already famous, and the school had invited him to give a talk. As he climbed the steps, the light suddenly flared—white, dazzling—and the applause broke out. A polite round, followed by another, thunderous one. The female host’s voice cracked with emotion, rising sharper and higher, until at last he realized: it was his son kneeling before him.

If only I could see, he thought.

“In my mind he’s still the face of a four-year-old,” Haixia said, leading me back from the riverbank toward his home, across a bridge made from a thick concrete pipe. *“Now he hardly comes home.”*

“The first years all I got was my wife’s scolding,” Haixia continued. *“Every day she cursed me—‘You plant trees every day, can you eat those trees?’”*

Planted among cobblestones, the roots could not reach deep. Out of a hundred thousand branches, only twenty thousand sprouted; half of those died before spring. The ten thousand that survived became the grove floating above the stones. Wasps came uninvited, as did rabbits, vanishing into the grass only to pop up ten meters away. Only someone who lived in the grove could track them by the trembling of the leaves. Once, when the township chief came to inspect, he was greeted by a meter-long snake.

“It’s like a botanical garden!” Wenqi used to say. After reading reports written about them, he changed his line: *“It’s like an ecosystem!”*

From the time Haixia feared that touching the leaves would kill them to the time the trees grew taller than he was, only three years had passed. After that, he no longer knew how tall they had become.

They no longer needed to steal branches from neighboring villages. Their own trees were now strong enough, large enough to supply all the cuttings they needed. The grove’s expansion was plain to see, stretching toward the railway bridge, spilling past its arches, spreading onto the riverbank of the next village.

Haixia was fifty-five. Many times he nearly fell from the trees—high enough to break his neck. The closest call came when a great bird burst from the branches beside him. Startled, he lost his footing and slid partway down the trunk, saved only by another branch that caught him. He once led a young photographer to see the bird’s nest. *“So white, so beautiful, with black-tipped wings and a red beak,”* the photographer said. Then he admitted he did not know what bird it was.

“Damn it,” Haixia said, recounting how his wife scolded him, never forgetting to curse her back.

What best illustrates the state of this once-tender marriage is the story of a kitten. Last June his wife brought one home, feeding it sausage and fussing over it—“*We can hardly afford sausage ourselves!*” Haixia said. One night soon after, he stepped on it and was bitten. From that single bite he felt the kitten’s hatred. From then on, he wanted to smash it dead.

The blind hate cats most, because cats move without sound—as dangerous as a time bomb. Yet his wife insisted on keeping it.

From every angle, Haixia had slipped down from the peak of his life. Compared with home, the grove felt more like his home now. Around that time Wenqi often watched him plant a peach sapling, then a bamboo, then a toon tree, dismissing it all as another of his partner’s “*womanish*” gestures, like fondling tender leaves. Until one day he saw Haixia walking alone in the grove, then finding his way back to the river unaided. Only then did he realize: this was a coordinate system.

By planting peach, bamboo, and toon trees at fixed intervals, Haixia had created a checkerboard map. As the grove grew and grew into a forest, sighted people might lose their way, but the blind man never would. Wenqi was shaken, realizing he had underestimated his partner’s mind.

When Lining’s girlfriend saw the grove, she gasped, nearly moved to tears.

Wenqi once watched as Haixia, climbing to cut a branch, did not stop, as if drawn upward by something unseen. The tree swayed violently; he shifted with its rhythm, moving quickly, stepping higher and higher until Wenqi could no longer see him. Higher and higher, and then Haixia felt light again before his eyes. “*It was like a plane breaking through the clouds.*” Now he knew how tall his forest had grown.

The young photographer returned and told him: “*It was a white stork.*”

A blind man, with an armless man, had planted a grove on stones—and a white stork, or something like it, had come to rest there.



▲ Haixia cutting branches from a tree he planted himself

Guan and Bao

Wenqi knew how to handle conflicts. Once he quarreled fiercely with Haixia: the prime spots had all been planted, so should they plant directly in the irrigation channel or farther away on the bank? Neither could persuade the other. *“If we plant in the channel, it blocks the water, and when the floods come everything will be washed away.” “If we plant on the bank, the trees will dry out before they’re tall enough to be washed away.”* The ones planted on the bank did indeed dry out. They later called that period their *“Cold War,”* when they spoke not a word to each other—though, as Haixia said, *“We kept planting trees. As soon as I reached out my hand, he knew what I wanted.”*

Wenqi remembered a Tibetan nurse, Baima Yizhen, who had sent them two thousand yuan every year. That year the money hadn’t arrived. Of course, donations were voluntary, but something felt off, so he decided to call her to express thanks and check in. She brought it up herself: the money had already been sent. *“If Haixia hadn’t told me he changed his bank card, I would have wired it to the wrong account.”*

That was not their shared bank account. “Now you see,” Wenqi said, “*our friendship is like that of Guan Zhong and Bao Shuya—Guan was often selfish and unreliable, but Bao always treated him well. I just can’t stomach his human nature.*”

For fairness of a sort, Haixia also did not know that while Wenqi planted trees beside him every day, he also collected duck eggs on the side. The village ducks wandered the river during the day and returned to their coops to lay eggs at night. But some couldn’t keep their timing, and their eggs rolled onto the riverbank. When Wenqi spotted them, he would pinch them between his feet and drop them into the tool basket. On good days he could gather forty or fifty—one small advantage of being the one who could see.

Duck Anecdote

Haixia was born blind in one eye and lost the other later in life. The grove he had planted for fifteen years—so tall and shaded it drew white storks—was eventually destroyed. Yet when I asked him about the saddest moment of his life, he said it was when his ducks died.

In the third year of his blindness, Haixia began raising ducks. Alone, he tended the wobbling balls of down as they grew into nimble-legged adults, following the lead duck to the water. He said he got along with most of them, except for a few bad-tempered ones that liked to snap at him with their flat bills.

The smell of five hundred ducks crowded together can only be known to those who have raised them. His fastidious wife wished he would just move his bed into the duck shed; he even considered it—not for her sake, but because he suspected the neighbors he had once offended were taking revenge on his ducks. His proof was in the strange eggs. Ducks are sensitive: frightened in the night, they lay deformed eggs by morning. In his hand he once found eggs as small as quail eggs, others as large as goose eggs, and some with shells bulging in the middle like a blister.

His ducks suffered from ovarian inflammation, respiratory infections, and gastrointestinal disease. Ovarian trouble showed no outward sign—only the failure to lay eggs. Respiratory illness required pressing an ear to a duck’s chest to hear its breathing. These he managed to overcome. But gastrointestinal sickness was trickier: intestinal disease produced yellow droppings, stomach disease green ones. He could not see, so he consulted an old hand. The

man said there was one more way: *“Taste it. Intestinal droppings are sweet, stomach ones are foul.”*

His ducks fell ill many, many times.

For a while, the ducks of Yeli flourished, nearly taking over every body of water. But soon the television carried a rolling *“Timed Duck Extermination Notice.”* The government declared ducks the main culprit polluting Shijiazhuang’s water source, and villagers scrambled to hide theirs.

In the end, one night, all of Haixia’s ducks died. *“A weasel killed them all,”* he said. The true cause of death remained a mystery. Wenqi suspected someone had poisoned them; he guessed Haixia didn’t say so because he suspected too many people and couldn’t be sure which one. Part of the suspicion came from a fight Haixia had with a neighbor. He had seized the man by the collar and was kicking him when another figure suddenly appeared, striking Haixia’s head from behind with a rock. He never found out who it was.



▲ The ducks returned to the water after the flood

The Armless Wanderer

2014 became what they later called *“the Year of Touching Hebei.”* 2016 was *“the CNN Year.”* That was when they became famous. *“From ancient times to now,”* Wenqi stressed, *“no foreigner had ever come to Yeli before.”*

Wave after wave of foreigners traveled thousands of miles to see their trees. *“In 2014, 2015, 2016, that’s all we did—give interviews,”* Haixia said. Wenqi would describe the faces to his blind partner, when he was in the mood.

“Koreans look pretty much like us—except their black hair is different,” Wenqi said.

“How different?” asked Haixia.

“Extra black.”

As their spokesman, Wenqi had grown fluent, almost theatrical, before the cameras. This is how he described the grove: *“The cuckoo calls ‘koo-koo,’ the oriole sings ‘huang-he-liu, huang-he-liu,’ the magpie chatters ‘cha-cha, cha-cha.’ The melons hang like light bulbs, the beans drape like necklaces. Layer upon layer, a jade tower; row upon row, a pearl pagoda.”*

Haixia smiled, nodded, and echoed, *“Yes, yes.”*

Every interview with a camera required them to perform: carrying one another across the river, hammering and chiseling, climbing trees. One day they performed three such shows and collapsed into illness.

Haixia asked Wenqi, *“Do people in other places know about us now?”*

Wenqi answered, *“All of humanity knows us.”*

Wenqi had acquired the confidence of a celebrity, strolling the streets of Yeli as if they were his own courtyard. One day, walking along, he spotted four women washing clothes by a puddle, and without answering my question, he stripped down and bathed comfortably in the muddy water.

He called his travels to different places *“conquests.”* On the map of China, only Tibet and Hainan remained for him to conquer. That topic led to a question: would I accompany him to Hainan? Sitting across from me at the dining table, his right foot stretched up, flexible as

an octopus tentacle, gripping a lighter between his big toe and second toe. *Snap*—he lit the cigarette in his mouth, then his foot slipped silently back beneath the table. “*The police station misspelled my name,*” he said. “*It should have been the ‘Qi’ of ‘Angel Qi.’*” As he spoke, he shifted the cigarette with his tongue, holding it steadily between his upper lip and front teeth.

He told me that in his youth he had been a man of influence in Yeli, active in village elections, helping every candidate he supported to win. “*To put it bluntly, I was ruling from behind the curtain,*” he said. “*Like Deng Xiaoping, like Empress Dowager Cixi.*”

Outside of spring, Wenqi often wandered with a troupe of disabled performers, drifting wherever they went. While scantily dressed girls danced, he sat to the side, writing calligraphy with his feet. By the time the dance ended, the characters were complete—sometimes “*Self-strengthening without cease,*” sometimes “*Heaven rewards diligence.*” He spoke fondly of his many lovers, especially one: a curly-haired woman with pale skin in a red slip dress. “*We lived together, so she won’t have forgotten me.*”

Haixia, meanwhile, had only the grove. If he could not be found, one had only to look there—he would be sitting quietly among the trees, doing nothing.

Haixia’s second deep regret over his blindness came the day his wife returned home. In February 2016, she entered the bedroom with her suitcase to find Haixia sitting on the bed, talking on the phone with a female classmate from junior high. After “*all humanity knew him,*” he had dug out his old notebook and resumed contact with former classmates—mostly women. On the line, now in her fifties, the woman wept as she told him she was gravely ill. “*I’m dying, I have no money for treatment—when I’m gone I’ll still miss you,*” she said. “*I’ll miss you too,*” Haixia answered tenderly. “*Why didn’t you tell me you had no money?*”

His wife leaned against the doorframe, watching him. “*What is your relationship!*” she demanded.

Haixia froze for a moment, then decided to answer even louder: “*What do you think our relationship is?*”



▲ The riverbank after the grove was lost

The Flood

Timber buyers came knocking, and Wenqi found a new line of business: going door to door buying trees from villagers and reselling them to the buyers. One man could earn ten yuan a day. After nearly two years of this, their own village and the one next door were almost bare, yet not a single tree from their grove was sold. Aside from the fact that once sold, they could no longer *“keep doing interviews,”* there was another important reason: at fifteen years old, their poplars were at the fastest-growing stage of their lives. Wenqi explained that planting trees was like saving money: the grove was like a bank, the longer you waited, the higher the interest.

In 2016, the safety window Wenqi had calculated came to an end. On July 19, torrential rains began at 1 p.m. and lasted until 8 the next morning. In a single day, the rainfall exceeded the total precipitation of Jingxing County for the whole of 2015. That afternoon, the downpour beat on the overturned tin basins in the yard like drums. Wenqi made his way to Haixia’s hut—a rare visit, for a man without arms it was exhausting to climb slopes.

“Just one day of rain, nothing serious,” he told Haixia. *“If it were, I’d be here.”*

Back home, Wenqi grew restless. By nine that evening he stepped out, turned right, and walked to the highway, gazing toward the river. The water's white gleam was not like before. By ten o'clock his phone had lost signal.

After eleven he pushed through the storm, walking the road toward the grove. His clothes were drenched, his eyes barely open. In the darkness he saw a thin, sharp red line—*infrared, like that*. When he finally arrived, the river looked like a sea, glittering and swaying, light trembling across the surface all the way to where the grove had stood.

It was happening now. He knew the trees were being carried off, bit by bit. He had seen it twenty years earlier. He had arrived just in time. He stood watching, as if his gaze could pierce the dark and see the trees—though of course he saw nothing.

When he smashed open Haixia's gate again, Haixia came out naked. Clearly he had not been asleep; his face showed he already knew what Wenqi was there to tell him.

The rain stopped, the village lay in darkness, the power outage lasting three days. Their grove had been swept downstream, to who knew where.

The riverbank looked like a supermarket during a frantic clearance sale. People hauled out refrigerators, solar water heaters, speakers, motorcycles. Fish were endless. Ponds upstream had been emptied, their stock carried away. People jammed electric prods into the water, and dead fish floated thick on the surface. These were "*Beijing people's fish*"—rainbow trout and salmon weighing ten kilos each, worth millions.

The ducks villagers had hidden came bursting out, swept downstream before their eyes. Those washed ashore were snatched up.

The kitten gorged on salmon and died the next day.

When the flood night was over, at noon, Haixia still sat naked in the middle of the sofa, a sight that frightened his wife. She dragged him outside for a walk.

He went into the street, gazed toward the river like any sighted man, then returned to sleep. He slept in stretches, and when he woke, it was already midday a week later. The week had vanished. All he remembered was sleeping.

Wenqi took me to the riverbank. Armless, he twisted his torso in the current, hoping I could understand how vast the grove had once been. As for Haixia, he had only gone there once since the flood, and had lost his way. The river had shifted to the opposite side. Where the grove had stood was now mudflat and cobblestones, where every few steps you could pick up a mussel the size of a child's palm.

The surviving ducks resumed their lives, and the duck ban was quietly forgotten. In the story of the flood, only the ducks received a happy ending.

The flood left thirty-eight dead and thirty-three missing in Jingxing County. By custom, the names of the dead and missing were not released.

The day after the flood, coal miners returned from the county seat upstream with news: four textile girls and an entire dormitory building had disappeared, like something out of a movie. Haixia said he could picture it. You could see old age creep onto his face. Sitting at home, he looked uneasy, once again a guest bringing trouble to his hosts. *"I quit smoking, but I've started again,"* he said. By *"started,"* he meant simply holding a cigarette in his mouth. *"It's like a dream."*

Wenqi and Haixia planned to start planting again at the spring equinox of 2017.