

Japanese People Contributing Worldwide

Growing Trees and Friendship

Mr. Kunio Takami has been working on greening and afforestation projects in China for 23 years. He spends around 100 days a year in Shanxi Province, busily checking progress to ensure that cooperation with Chinese partners goes smoothly and to help Japanese volunteers on study tours.

Under the slogan “Environment has no borders,” the group began in 1992 with just a few members. Working together with locals in Datong, Shanxi, 300 km west of Beijing, it has tackled the city’s desertification problems by planting 18.8 million saplings to date on 5,600 ha of land.

The group’s work has been praised as a successful example of international cooperation, receiving both the Foreign Minister’s Commendation from Japan and an environmental award from China in 2012. However, there were many difficulties and repeated setbacks to overcome in the early days.

The local environment is so harsh there is said to be “drought nine years out of every ten,” and early tree-planting activities faltered. The group could not find an appropriate planting method. “We were at a loss many times, standing in front of a devastated plantation,” Mr. Takami explains.

One of the keys to turning things around was building a strong relationship of trust with locals. Through such activities as extensive visits to farming villages, the group developed extremely close relationships with the community. At last, an office was established in Datong so that Chinese specialists could work together with Mr. Takami and other group members. After this, communication and teamwork between the two sides significantly improved. Also key was the participation of a Japanese plant researcher. His suggestion to use symbiosis between fungi and saplings to improve water absorption helped the roots to grow better, increasing the overall planting success rate. This generated huge interest among locals, with many commenting that they had never seen such healthy saplings.

Some of the pine saplings that the group planted are now seven-meter-high trees. The number of national and provincial projects is also growing rapidly, and the bare mountainside, which once dominated Datong’s scenery as far as the eye could see, is getting greener every year.

More than 3,600 Japanese volunteers have taken part in the project. Looking back, Mr. Takami says, “It seems like a miracle that we have been doing this for twenty years.” He adds, “Enthusiasm for greening is finally growing in China. Having created human bonds between Japan and China, we cannot stop our activities now.” And it is not only trees that have taken root: Mr. Takami and the group have helped to grow deeply rooted and flourishing connections between the two countries as well.



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1. Mr. Takami working on an afforestation project. 2. Planting trees with locals in Nantianmen Natural Botanical Park. 3. Eight years after the project began, the trees are firmly rooted and flourishing.

Kunio Takami

Executive Director of the Osaka NPO Green Earth Network. Born in Tottori Prefecture. After leaving the University of Tokyo, he promoted Japan-China exchange in the private sector. He was involved with founding Green Earth Network, becoming its executive director in 1994.

Bringing Medical Treatment from Japan to Myanmar

Dr. Hideto Yoshioka achieved great results in providing free medical care to poor children and supporting the training of local medical staff, in Cambodia, Laos, and particularly in Myanmar. A pediatric surgeon, he first thought of helping children with no access to medical treatment when he saw shocking news footage of starving African children. After graduating from the Faculty of Medicine at Oita University, he worked in pediatric emergency treatment in Japan for three years. Then in 1995, at the request of a Japanese NGO, he was sent to a rural city in central Myanmar. However, he was entirely on his own.

“There was no financial or personnel support, and it would all be over when my savings ran out,” he explains, but he did not lose heart. Amid tough medical work, with little time for sleep, he resolved to provide medical support imbued with the Japanese spirit of harmony (*wa*) and consideration (*kokoro*). In May 2004, he launched a volunteer-based international health organization, starting treatment in one section of a hospital in the suburbs of Mandalay, Myanmar’s second-largest city. The group now performs around 2,000 operations and 12,000 checkups every year.

At first, there were six Japanese medical staff and several locals, but by the second year there were 50 people and by the third there were 100. Today around 600–700 people participate in the project. Long-term volunteer physicians from Japan stay in Myanmar for one or two years and nurses for six months. Dr. Yoshioka says, “Since the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, there has been a transformation in Japanese people’s attitude toward charity and a great change in Japanese medical workers.”

The proportion of Myanmar staff, which deals with such matters as training local physicians and nurses and overseeing scholarships to medical and nursing students, is rising each year. Now, about half of the staff is Japanese and half is local.

The battle for free medical treatment, which started with the solitary persistence of Dr. Yoshioka, has continued for twenty years and has received high praise in Myanmar. Dr. Yoshioka also received the Japanese Foreign Minister’s Commendation for FY2014. He has taken his personal philosophies — “First, take one step forward” and “Experience is the mother of everything” — and put them into practice. He stresses, “I want to move international medical cooperation forward with a Japanese emphasis on quality.”



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1. Dr. Yoshioka at the Myanmar project. 2. Dr. Yoshioka conducting an operation. 3. Many people come for treatment.

Hideto Yoshioka

President of the volunteer-based international health organization Japan Heart. Began international cooperative medical activities in 1995 and founded Japan Heart in 2004. The organization sends physicians and other volunteers from Japan to such countries as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos to perform checkups and operations.