

Taking the stench out of sewage

NTU project makes evening strolls for Chinese villagers a joy

BY CAI HAOXIANG

YUANSHAN VILLAGE (Sichuan): Senior Chinese Communist Party official Ma Bo was burying his nose deep in books at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) when a massive earthquake ripped through his home province of Sichuan in China.

Stunned by the devastation wrought by the magnitude 8 earthquake in 2008, the deputy secretary-general of Sichuan province resolved to do something.

On Tuesday, the 46-year-old graduate

of an NTU programme for senior Chinese officials attended a ceremony here marking the completion of a project that he started with two NTU colleagues.

At the ceremony in the picturesque village of Yuanshan, he spoke of the origins of the project – which turns sewage into water that is fit for irrigation and fish farming – and a grant from Singapore's Lien Foundation that helped fund it.

"The day after the quake, I went to class with a heavy heart. A strong sense of mission sprang up among us officials as we discussed what we could do," he said in Mandarin.

"I visited Sichuan in the June holidays and saw how the Min River region had become more polluted and silted up."

The quake coincided with an inaugural NTU competition on environmental solutions, known as the Lien Challenge.



Mr Ma Bo squatting with Dr Wu Wei (second from left), dean of NTU's Nanyang Centre for Public Administration, as they study plants in the filtering system. With them are Mr Sun Bo (in purple) and NTU and Lien Foundation officials. Partially hidden is Mr Xie Min. ST PHOTO: CAI HAOXIANG

Launched in 2008, it encourages innovative environmental solutions for China among those attending the master of public administration and master in managerial economics programmes for mid- to senior-level officials from China. The Lien Foundation offers a \$500,000 grant to the team with the best project proposal.

Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive of the Lien Foundation, said the purpose of the contest was to "harness the political

clout and will" of Chinese officials in NTU to tackle China's water challenges.

Mr Ma and his team of fellow Sichuan officials Sun Bo and Xie Min studied the Min River area and proposed a low-cost project to treat pollutants of the river at their source. The team beat 19 others to come out tops.

Supported by Lien Aid – the international development arm of the foundation – and the local government, Mr Ma began

work turning the proposal into reality after he graduated last year.

His was the first winning project to be successfully implemented.

The finished project is an artificially enhanced wetland which uses gravity and plants to treat piped sewage from the village, producing biogas for fuel and water for irrigation. The treatment system processes 100 cubic m of water daily.

Yuanshan village, a "model village" that showcases rural development reforms, was chosen partly as work had already been done there on water pollution.

Village headman Ye Yuzhong, 55, said the 1,000 villagers were happy with the result, which has improved their quality of life.

He said in Mandarin: "Previously, villagers could not come out in the evening to enjoy the scenery and take a stroll as there was a big stink created by our primitive, open-air sewage disposal system.

"Now, the smell is gone, their living environment has improved, and the treated water can go into the fields and the fish pond."

Mr Ma's team does not intend to rest on its laurels. Having used only half the \$500,000 grant, they are now planning a similar project in earthquake-affected Sanjiang village also along the Min River.

"We are glad for the grant and support from the local government. Moreover, our people have to live here, these are our problems," he said.

"We will continue work on improving our water, environmental protection and quality of life, to create a culture to pass on to future generations and surrounding areas."

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