

ON THE GROUND IN EMERGING CHINA

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NEW WORLD PRESS

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

草根追梦录 / 龚寒等著. --北京: 新世界出版社,
2012. 12

ISBN 978-7-5104-2633-9

I. ①草… II. ①龚… III. ①青年—生活状况—中国
IV. ①D432.7

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2012)第040351号

On the Ground in Emerging China 草根追梦录

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图片提供: 新华社 cnsphoto 龚寒
责任编辑: 乔天碧 李淑娟
英文审定: Penelope Colville
封面设计: 贺玉婷
版式设计: 郭 磊
责任印制: 李一鸣 黄厚清
出版发行: 北京 新世界出版社
社 址: 北京市西城区百万庄大街24号 (100037)
总编室电话: +86 10 6899 5424 68326679 (传真)
发行部电话: +86 10 6899 5968 68998705 (传真)
本社中文网址: <http://www.nwp.cn>
版权部电子信箱: frank@nwp.com.cn
版权部电话: +86 10 6899 6306
印 刷: 北京京华虎彩印刷有限公司
经 销: 新华书店
开 本: 787×1092 1/16
字 数: 200千字 印张: 13.5
版 次: 2013年2月第1版 2013年2月北京第1次印刷
书 号: ISBN 978-7-5104-2633-9
定 价: 78.00元

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Foreword

The generation that came of age after the Chinese reform and opening up period has stories to tell that reveal much about the spirit of the country. These pioneers in their own right speak up on their values and chosen paths in life. The social upheaval created new concepts that were labeled by the media and entered public consciousness, but little information is available to improve our insight into those who make up the little emperor generation, the ant tribe, and indoorsmen/indoorswomen. Simple summaries won't do because there are hundreds of millions of such people in China.

Their forefathers were driven by the passions that founded New China and gave rise to the special age of the Cultural Revolution, while these generations by contrast seem free of bitterness and fed on honey. Nevertheless, they ushered in a surge of consumerism their forefathers could never have imagined, endured the unprecedented conflict spawned by the different values and subcultures that followed the push to globalization, and while at a very tender age had to shoulder the exceedingly high expectations held by their families as they survived the white-hot competition emerging in education, expertise and job hunting. The

contradictions and pressure opened up to them a very rich and subtle inner world beyond the reach of their forefathers.

It is not easy but very necessary to understand them. They are the generation born into the Chinese economic wonder that unfolded in the past 30 years, and the future of this miracle is in their hands. Any picture of the nation's future obtained through identification with their struggles will yield a deeper and more profound vision than any news report.

This book tells the stories of 20 or so Chinese youths who could be described as typical in the sense that their chances of success were no better, nor families any wealthier, than most of their peers. Some of them have not achieved the better life they envisioned just yet, and some are still struggling to survive in metropolises as China's famous and faceless migrant workers. However, they share one thing in common: They nurture dreams that are very alien to the age of consumption that supposedly defines this stage of China's development. They are not dreaming of owning luxury houses or fancy limousines, or attracting rich boyfriends or girlfriends. As is depicted by media, their dreams are modest but romantic.

Tao Xiangli, who used to work in a bar and received only an elementary school education, dreams of building submarines with parts scrounged from flea markets. He Yueling, a young man with no hands, struggled for his driving license for many years and became a certain kind of road warrior. Su Xi's mother stepped into the organic food industry motivated only by the need to provide food security for her daughter. These are mostly lone-hero stories that drew the attention of the public by accident.

If their forefathers' dreams were of universal welfare, their dreams

are of individual triumph minus the egotistical focus. Andrew launched the One-More-Kilo Movement encouraging travelers to take kids in backward areas one kilo of literature or learning materials. He said: "You help another not because he is poor but because he is a person just like you." "We are tiny and weak, and our work doesn't always go well. Sometimes we make no impression because many don't understand us. We're not stars; each of us is just a small potato, but we did something great when we got together. I felt a sense of responsibility, courage and inner strength in each of us."

Though these 20 youths represent only a tiny portion of China's numerous young people, their dreams are like fireflies giving off their faint light in the dark sky and inspiring a warm response in each of us. Those lights will eventually illuminate the bright future of a nation.

Editor

November 2012

Contents

The Don Quixote Submariner	001
Civilian Idols	012
A Wonderful Life Interpreted with Feet	022
A Blind Messi	032
A Blind Videographer Pushing the Limits	042
Handless King of the Road Fights for the Driver's Seat	054
Original Animation Makes Me Happy	068
"Being Happy" Is Paramount	078
Comedic Duo Made the Laughing Stock	089
Miracle of China's New Media	099
Empowering Children through Literature	110
The Organic Life of Mama Suxi	123

Andrew and His One-More-Kilo Movement	137
A Non-Typical Volunteer	148
A Strong China Doll	162
Solo Circumnavigator	174
A Rural Cadre from Tsinghua University	186
The Chinese Flute Player	194

The Don Quixote Submariner

By Zhang Xueying

In July 2008 when the No.1 Chinese Vodcaster (video podcast maker), Liu Yuanxiang, was nosing around in the street with his digital video camera, he suddenly noticed a huge missile-like thing standing there. His own curiosity told him there might be a good story behind it, so he asked around about what it was. The answers came as quite a surprise: it was a submarine. That was how Liu Yuanxiang met Tao Xiangli for the first time. And to Tao's surprise, that was just the beginning of their story.

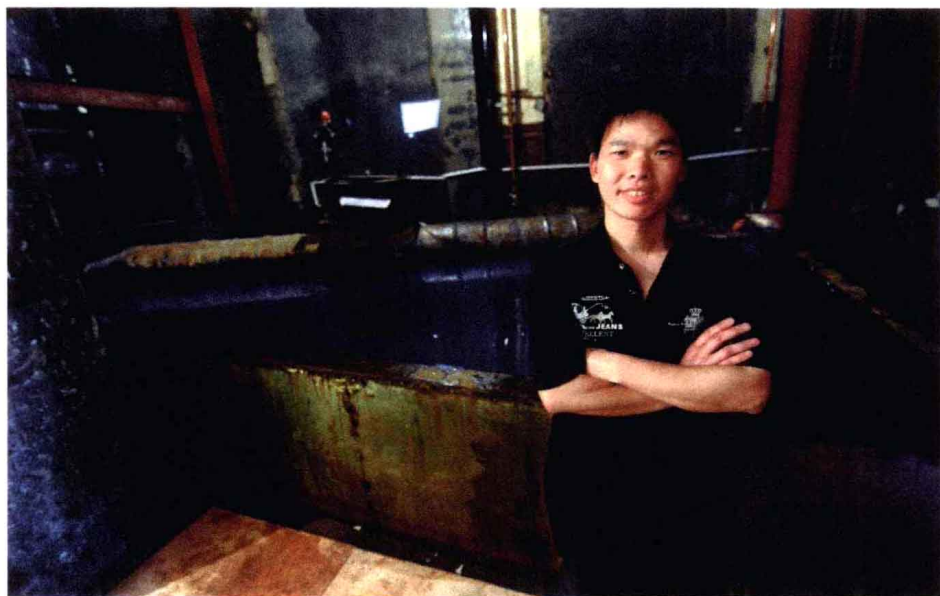
One Day I'll Be a Somebody

Tao Xiangli was already used to inquiries from the curious, and he was eager to show Liu Yuanxiang how his next invention would modify this mini-submarine so it could also fly. Back at his home, he very carefully took out a model of a flying submarine, with its two airfoils, from under the bed. "This idea is much more advanced than the existing submarine. If such a submarine went into production one day, it could dive into water and also fly vertically or obliquely." Though this scene took

place 3 years ago, Liu Yuanxiang recalls Tao's proud and excited look. "He told me that this would be the world's most unusual and advanced submarine, and he said one day he would build one, either in Beijing or abroad, that could travel along the ground as well as in the ocean or the sky.

In fact, the work that spoke to Liu Yuanxiang's creativity was just a simple combination of metal parts melded with tin cans and the like. When Liu Yuanxiang asked Tao Xiangli to show him how the small submarine took off, Tao's show failed. However he fiddled with the remote control, the submarine would not become airborne, either because of a broken wing or propeller. Not taking it too seriously, Liu Yuanxiang offered him some well-meaning advice: "You need to improve your model. It's a good idea, and if you scale it down to toy-size and put it into mass production, you'll be rich soon enough." Tao Xiangli's reply showed his shock: "You take me for a fool?"

The designer of the versatile submarine, to Liu Yuanyang's surprise,



Tao Xiangli stands in front of his own submarine.

was neither a technician nor a senior engineer, but a migrant worker from a village in Anhui Province who did not even complete his primary education.

Tao was born in 1974 in the village of Fuyang, where he remained in school for only five years. Eighteen years ago he came to Beijing and worked successively as a builder, a waiter, a grocer and a maintenance worker in a KTV. “I’ve been so many places and done so many different kinds of work, but I liked none of them,” Tao said. The new generation of migrant workers is no longer satisfied with staying in cities and working for money like their fathers. They are seeking their dreams and hopes instead. “I’m not an engineer, but I have had many wonderful ideas since I was a youth. I’m a genius and one day I’ll be a somebody,” Tao said with a characteristic touch of arrogance. According to his fellow villagers, however, this was a man with ridiculous ideas and strange, unnatural behaviors.

As a matter of fact, Tao has applied for over 20 national patents in his spare time, including for a massage and hair-washing machine and an automatic shoe polisher. Of these, 15 were issued patent certificates by the State Patent Office but none has been put into production. He was unable to afford the annual fees for the patents, and several certificates are now worthless. To improve the situation and attract some attention, he worked out his weird design for a manned mini-submarine in 2007. He sought solutions to technical problems from books and made the drawings himself, leaving the welding work to other people who offered to help.

The RMB 30,000 Dive

Despite the failed demonstration of the flying submarine, Liu Yuanxiang was still unnerved by Tao Xiangli’s larger missile-like creation. The

800-kg, 6.5-m submarine was meant to dive up to ten meters deep and cover eight to ten km per hour. “All its components come from dump sites; the body of the submarine consists of five gasoline cans; an electric bicycle battery provides the power, a stethoscope functions as sonar, and the instruments are all second-hand,” he explained. The small submarine has a very complete operating system with a steering instrument, a 360° rotatable periscope, an engine, a valve that lets water in and out, and even an oxygen supply system, all controlled by over 30 switches in the control cabin. “I managed to get many parts in the flea market because it’s the only source of some components and most others are cheaper there.” The elaborate model cost only 30,000 yuan, but that was all Tao had.

As a senior vlogger, Liu Yuanxiang could not remember how many people he had interviewed, but he had never met a man like Tao before. His instincts told him that a video about Tao’s gadget would go viral on-line, so he uploaded the video of his first meeting with the inventor entitled “A Submarine Made in Beijing by a Young Superman from Anhui.” Sure enough, the video was an immediate success, with nearly 200,000 people clicking it within one day. Meanwhile, it attracted the attention of the media, including the illustrious giants CNN, Reuters, Beijing Youth Daily and others. The police took note of the video too, but after visiting Tao, they found nothing unusual and left after asking some questions and checking out the now-famous submarine.

The extent of the vlog’s success surprised and pleased Liu Yuanxiang, so he decided to continue shooting Tao as he tested and refined the design. Tao was trying to attract public attention anyway, and he realized Liu Yuanxiang could help. They had found good collaborators in each other.

In September 2008, Tao Xiangli conducted his first trial voyage in a river around Beijing Fangshan Reservoir. The submarine needed to have its weight properly balanced for the dive. Not until then did Liu

Yuanxiang discover that Tao was working with neither drawings nor calculations but only instinct. “I kept shooting and watching. One minute he added bags of cement and sand, pushed the submarine into the water and checked what was happening, and the next he pulled it out of water and rebalanced it again. This process was repeated many times until ten bags of cement and sand were carefully placed and Tao muttered, ‘Maybe this will do.’” Liu Yuanxiang said he was thinking how ridiculous it all was.

Sure enough, the first trial voyage ended in failure. A month later Tao Xiangli gave Liu Yuanxiang a call to inform him of a second trial around Fangshan Reservoir again. “Before he dived, I told him to float for five minutes first or I would feel the need to rescue him, but there was nothing I could do anyway because the door of the control cabin was locked from the inside and I couldn’t open it from the outside,” Liu said. When he witnessed the submariner and his contraption dive into the water, he was scared. Though the submarine’s maiden voyage lasted only three minutes, it was like a century to Liu Yuanxiang. He can still recall every detail of his reactions even now.

Tao Xiangli remembered the trial very well, too. “When I opened the door, Liu shouted that he was frightened and I comforted him.” According to Tao Xiangli, it was safe inside the submarine because the two oxygen cylinders he put inside played the role of an oxygen chamber in a normal submarine. Moreover, he added, “The submarine was well-sealed with water-proof paint and a propeller installed in the bottom that floats the submarine in the event of an emergency.”

However, when the submarine was about to be free of its captain, it sunk quickly below the waterline and its cabin was immediately flooded. Tao Xiangli escaped by swimming out through the open door and made it to the bank.

“By the time I climbed onto the bank, the submarine had already disappeared. One of my shoes was gone with it, and my cotton coat and

sweater got soaked. The freezing air of the suburbs made me shudder and I suddenly felt very sad,” Tao Xiangli recalled.

During the next three days, he raised the submarine from the bottom. Every day for the next two months, he set off from his rented house, changed buses twice and walked 2 to 2.5 km to the reservoir in order to repair his invention. At dusk he spent four to five hours going back. It was a freezing November, and he had nothing but dried steamed bread and water for lunch. Villagers living around there gradually became familiar with the stranger. Occasionally they saw him shivering and repairing the strange vessel. Some villager asked him why he was so intent on saving it. “I like it.” He replied smoothly.

Brothers Marching to the Beat of a Different Drum

The submersion of the submarine impaired or ruined most of its old instruments and components. As a KTV casual employee, he was paid little but needed to make his rent, water and electricity, and now it was harder to make ends meet. Had he not improved the submarine with better quality components however, it would never have sailed again. “No choice,” he felt, so he began to borrow money. However, to borrow hurt his pride. “At first people were willing to lend me money, but as I borrowed more, they lost confidence in me. They thought it was likely I couldn’t pay them back, so more and more people began to refuse me. They refused to lend me 50, 20 and even 10. I owe 10,000 in all, for the submarine.” He described his toughest period calmly. “When times were darkest for my girlfriend and me, we collected cola cans and sold them for steamed bread. That is how we spent that period. It was hard, but I feel I have lived a better life than my parents did.”

Tao Xiangli comes from Taoxin Village, Linquan District, Fuyang,



Tao Xiangli climbs off the aircraft carrier he designed, which is on display at the Art Museum Square, the Bund.

Anhui Province. It was a long hike from the village to the end of the road. His poor family had a three-room brick house with very little furniture, and each room had only a single window without a glass pane. The four young people of the family worked in other places, leaving two 70-year-old parents and one six-year-old child at home. “Compared with my parent’s rural life, mine is much better. I must thank the times because I have been able to do what I want. I don’t want to live with the pain that I do not understand my child, so I insist on doing what I like, though many criticize and curse me. I don’t want to be living their way decades from now, so I act on my own impulses. I have to succeed.”

Tao represents more and more migrant workers in this new generation who are looking forward to leaving poverty behind and winning the respect of society.

After the new kit was installed and repairs made, Tao called Liu to

invite him to shoot the trial voyage again. Given the previous failures, Liu felt some trepidation, but Tao's insistence convinced him, and the inventor promised this time the voyage would be a success. Liu learnt a lesson from the previous voyage, and he invited the media to attend the launch. Meanwhile, people living around there turned up too. Ten minutes after the third trial voyage started, the whole body of the submarine disappeared in the water except for its nose. Liu felt something was wrong, so he hastily pulled the submarine out of the water with the help of some people standing on the bank. Everyone was scared but Tao emerged intact with a smile on his face. Acrid curses burst out from the crowd. "You're risking your life!" they shouted, and, "You Damn Fool!" Liu Yuanxiang was so exasperated with Tao he wanted to put a stop to the crazy trials by giving him a sound beating.

But Tao was nothing if not stubborn; he faced down the derision. With every failure, an increasing number of people felt the submarine adventure was a conceited slapstick rather than a serious dream. Various criticisms came his way; some were mere rebukes; others were pointed questions or expressions of doubt. "Many even said I was digging a grave for myself; that was the most vicious curse I heard." Tao said. In Liu Yuanxiang's eyes, Tao's insistence contained a measure of arrogance. "During the trial voyage I kept thinking of giving up because rescuing him and his submarine was always the keynote of each trial. I was really scared," Liu said. Tao felt differently, "I never took it as failure. As long as I don't give up, I don't fail, because failed voyages are just setbacks."

What tortured Tao were not the setbacks and hardships, but the loneliness. "No success and no achievement means no money. I couldn't go home penniless," was how he rallied himself to try again and again.

In fact many people continued to help Tao, and Liu was one of them. As a digital videographer and DV fan, Liu himself is also regarded as somewhat perverse. He spends all his money buying video equipment

and going out on shoots. Born in a village, he became a drifter in Beijing, used to being laid-off from work and struggling with various hardships. As a result, he was mentally attuned to Tao. With the help of Liu Yuanxiang, Tao became a web celebrity known as Submarine Man. As his fame increased, his trial voyages attracted more and more people. When Tao was broke, Liu paid his rent and bought submarine components for him. They used to be partners, and now they can be described as brothers. Liu turned from a bystander into an active participant. “Later on it became a battle of two men against the odds. I was eager to see him succeed,” Liu Yuanxiang said.

On October 17, 2009, the media finally witnessed Tao Xiangli’s success. The trial process, lasting for more than one year and suffering more than 20 failures, ended with a four-meter deep dive and a navigation of 30 meters. The emergence of the submarine from the water symbolized the triumph of the submariner’s persistence. Liu Yuanxiang was rather excited that day too. He remembered that Tao exclaimed on getting out of the craft, “It belongs to us.”

Eye on the Prize: the Value of Underwater Robots

Tao Xiangli cannot remember how many interviews he has given so far. “If you’re crazy about something, you are bound to lose something else. If you like a lot of things but aren’t good at any of them, you’ll lose everything. It’s really quite difficult to see things through to the end and win public recognition.” Recalling that period two years ago, Tao still has a lot to say. Tao’s neighbor said, “My son admires him very much; in his heart Tao is a scientist as great as Madame Curie.”

In March 2010, Tao’s original submarine, Hope, was acquired by Chinese American artist and collector Cai Guoqiang. At the Shanghai