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Inventors need investments

By HU YONGQI

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Imagination and creativity can only go so far, money is needed to turn the idea for an invention into a product.

IN the movie *2012*, mankind is threatened with annihilation by a deluge, the likes of which has never been seen. Those who survive escape the flood in a gigantic ark.

The idea of this ark grabbed popular imagination in China, particularly given the many floods it has experienced in recent years. Where would you find such a vessel?

In Yiwu, Zhejiang province, inventor Yang Zongfu provides if not the gargantuan ark of the movie, at least a diminutive alternative.

Yang invented and is producing a spherical ark 4m in diameter that weighs six metric tonnes. It has seats you can strap yourself into, windows and a ventilation system. It's designed to withstand collisions, radiation and high temperatures. Three people could survive for up to a year on the pilot biscuits, water and oxygen it carries.



Getting prepared: Zhang Junlin standing beside his submarine which can hold 12 passengers. — China Daily

Yang, 32, was confident in his design after its field test in which he tumbled down a hill inside the ark and into a pool. "It proved to be a success because it didn't shake at all inside. It's safe, very safe," he said.

The ark is just one of Yang's creations in the past six years. He has 300 to his credit and holds 36 patents, which bring his business annual revenue of 100 million yuan.

Other inventors seem doomed to disappointment. Guo Tianqiao, 80, who holds four patents, retired from a shipyard in Dalian, Liaoning province, 20 years ago. No one has shown interest in his patents, and he has been begging around Beijing South Railway Station since February.

Guo started researching how to clean automobile exhaust in 1995 and was granted a patent for his method in 2003. For 30 years, he devoted himself to his inventions, and the only thing he cared about was how to

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perfect them.

But he had no experience in developing a business and had difficulty pitching his ideas to investors. His efforts to find investments always failed.

In 2011, independent inventors contributed 36% of the 1.5 million patent applications submitted to the State Intellectual Property Office. However, they hold just 58,797 patents, making up 8% of patents in China.



For the love of his wife: Li Rongbiao helping Zhao down the stairs on his specially-made wheelchair. — China Daily

According to the China Association of Inventions in Beijing, 1.4 million independent inventors nationwide are developing ideas they hope to patent. Many of them have quit their jobs, even left their families behind to make inventing their profession.

However, their fates vary greatly, experts say, depending on their business awareness and financial support.

After testing his ark on Aug 6, Yang's two cellphones rang nonstop. He was getting 50 calls a day about the vessel. One businessman calling from Shanxi province wanted to order 15 arks.

Yang was on the road to making his fortune inventing, but it was hard work.

In 2002, after graduating from university, the native of Jiangxi province found a low-paying job as a tourist guide in Guangdong province. Unsatisfied with that, he started a trading business to earn more, but through inexperience lost everything on some bad deals.

In May 2004, he went to Yiwu to trade daily commodities. By the next year, he had made only a meagre profit owing to the ferocious competition among local traders. In 2006, he was granted a patent on a new type of zipper.



Safe and sound: Yang Zongfu emerging from his ark after rolling down a hill into a pool in the test in Yiwu, Zhejiang province. — China Daily

"The first patent was encouraging, but trying to get it manufactured was so hard," said Yang. Twice he was cheated when looking for investors in neighbouring cities. "The fraudsters took my schematic drawing, and that was the last I saw of them," he said.

However, Yang did not give up. Unlike many other young men, he does not play computer games, and he has no hobbies. He studied about 16 hours a day and mastered physics, chemistry and other disciplines. Whenever he came across technical problems with his designs, he would turn to experts, and he wasn't put off by criticism.

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Yang's persistence bore fruit a year later when he designed the shape-shift silk scarf - scarves whose design changes depending on how they are folded. He used all his savings to have the scarves made in 2007. The product was wildly popular with young women. In 2009, his factory had 120 million yuan in revenue.

He now owns three companies, which yield a net income of more than 100 million yuan a year.

An uphill task

Yang said 90% of his inventions have not gone into production. But Li Rongbiao, 68, was lucky the first time around when he managed to put his patented electric wheelchair into production in 2008.

Hidden amid the cornfields in Beijing's Tongzhou district, Li's bungalow is no different from his neighbours' homes. But it is where he fulfils his dream of building the best possible electric wheelchairs. His wheelchair can climb up and down stairs, a useful feature for people who cannot walk and live in buildings that do not have elevators.

In 2002, his wife Zhao Shuying, 70, was unable to walk for six months after breaking her ankle in a fall. The couple then lived in an apartment building with plenty of stairs. Li racked his brain thinking of ways to make a wheelchair so he could bring his wife outside.

While talking with a Japanese friend, he got the idea for an electric wheelchair that could climb the stairs in his building.

For four years, Li perfected his model, going from three to five wheels to give it better balance. In 2006, he sold his apartment in downtown Beijing for 400,000 yuan to start his business. His wife, Zhao, was against spending their 500,000 yuan savings, and she distrusted the feasibility of the wheelchairs.

Li's two daughters, who live in Los Angeles, were also strongly opposed to his plan. They e-mailed that they would gladly pay for daily needs their parents might have, but not if their father lost everything if his business failed.

In the end, Li's wife stood by him and the couple made their first wheelchair in 2007 in a rented house in Qianzhaifu village. Zhao was the first one to go downstairs in the wheelchair. In 2009, Li recruited nine workers as orders for the wheelchairs grew.

This month, the nine workers in Li's factory have been busy assembling wheelchairs with cushions, wheels, and metal bars that were cut and polished for arm and back rests. They can make one wheelchair a day, and three within two days during peak seasons, such as spring.

The wheelchairs cost 9,900 to 13,000 yuan, depending on how expensive the metal bars are. As of July, Li had sold more than 500 and donated a few to disabled friends.

Preparation pays off

Yang Zongfu and Li Rongbiao both attribute their success to their preparation before going into production - compiling meticulous surveys and accurate marketing strategies.

China has more than 120 million people older than 65. In his research, Li found that more than 20 million of the 82 million people with disabilities in China have difficulty walking. He concluded that the market for electric wheelchairs has great potential. What's more, imported electric wheelchairs cost at least 24,000 yuan, twice as much as his.

Li studied at a university in the 1960s, and worked for 20 years importing goods from Japan. Most inventors, however, are not well educated and finished only middle or high school, said Wang Yuzhong, director of invention promotion centre at the China Association of Inventions.

"It takes a very long time to turn the idea for an invention into a product. Usually, an applicant can get a patent by submitting a concept. But the applicant has to make a model to check how the idea works and further improve the model," said Wang. Most inventors earn less than 50,000

yuan a year, according to a survey the association conducted.

Inventors can also authorise companies to manufacture their patents, but it's extremely difficult to get paid. Like Yang, many inventors have been conned when they tried to do this.

Guo Tianqiao, from Dalian, was cheated by five companies, in Changli county, Hebei province, and Heze, Shandong province. Now he has to rely on donations from strangers to pay the 8,000 yuan annual fees for his patents, each costing 2,000 yuan in annual fees.

The leadership in China attaches great value to grassroots inventors and their contributions. This month, Zhao Zhengyi, a farmer and inventor - of concrete foundations for heavy duty cranes - from Beijing was received by vice-president Xi Jinping.

In January 2008, Premier Wen Jiabao met Yang Zongfu in Beijing when he submitted his idea for snow removal equipment, at a time when continuous snow and icy rain wreaked havoc in South China.

"In the 10-minute meeting, Premier Wen told me to make more inventions that will help our people, especially when they face destructive disasters," Yang recalled.

Li and his wife have no plan to expand production - the equipment and labour would cost more than they have, and investors have shown little interest because there are no quick returns in wheelchairs.

In 2011, the inventors of more than 60% of the 10,270 patents authorised for production got contracts of less than 10,000 yuan from companies buying the rights. Only 4.3% of the contracts were worth one million yuan, according to Zou Dingguo, a researcher at Tsinghua University's TusPark Research Institute for Innovation.

Zou said China needs to better protect intellectual property rights to create fair and equitable competition.

Yang Zongfu has a plan to open a training centre for inventors, to produce more good ideas and help them apply for patents. The next step would be to establish a platform for inventors to connect with companies to make the most of the patents. "As long as new ideas are accepted by businesses, patents can promote economic and social development. That way, our economy can be more sustainable and healthy." — China Daily/Asia News Network

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