



[THE FLYING FARMERS]

ACROSS CHINA DAREDEVILS ARE FOLLOWING A PIONEERING FARMER AND MAKING DIY AIRCRAFT OUT OF JUNK. MEET THE MAGNIFICENT (MIDDLE-AGED) MEN IN THEIR FLYING MACHINES

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LIKE MOST MEN OF A CERTAIN AGE, Chinese farmer Xu Bin is often to be found pottering in his back yard. But while most of us spend weekends in the garden constructing nothing more elaborate than a climbing frame for runner beans, Xu Bin built an aeroplane in his.

But this is no lifesize kid's toy. After cobbling it together out of bits of old plastic, recycled scrap metal, a discarded motorbike engine and anything else he could find at his local rubbish tip, Bin took to the skies in his plane, using it as a death-defying makeshift crop sprayer. No training, no pilot's licence, no parachute. Talk about flying by the seat of your pants.

He's one of a growing band of Chinese eccentrics who spend their spare time turning recycled trash into the flimsiest of homemade aeroplanes. Photographer Xiaoxiao Xu spent last year travelling across three provinces in China, living

with eight of these self-styled aeronauts and their families, collecting their documentation and sketches, and capturing on camera the heroic fruits of their labour in her recently released book, *Aeronautics In The Backyard*.

'It was the fairytale nature of what these men are doing that first appealed to me,' she explains. 'It's playful and almost magical because they are simply in love with the idea of being able to fly. And what they lack in education and resources, they make up for in determination and ingenuity in order to make their childlike dreams come true.'

Each of the eight aeronauts has a different method of building their flying machines. But what they have in common is that they're all self-educated, self-employed and virtually penniless. Incredibly, most of them have only ever seen aeroplanes from a distance. Instead their knowledge



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comes from studying pictures on the internet or in specialist magazines and then replicating what they've seen in pencil drawings before searching rubbish tips for scrap materials to turn their flights of fancy into bone-shaking reality.

Wang Qiang works as a barber and started his quest to fly by building planes made from bamboo, which he harvested from the nearby forest. ‘They could all fly but unfortunately they were all destroyed by his mother who needed them for

firewood,’ says Xiaoxiao. ‘Every time his mother burnt one, he'd just start again and build another. Nothing deters these men from achieving their dream. Every setback just makes them more determined.’

Indeed, one builder, Cao Zhengshu, had his precious airframe and motorbike engine stolen from his back yard shed. But instead of quitting, he deterred future thieves by simply moving his bed into the shed, to keep one eye on his fledgling aeroplane while he slept.

The ingenuity and lateral thinking of these magnificently foolhardy men in their flying machines knows no bounds. ‘One of them didn't have access to the village street from his small back yard so he wasn't able to utilise it as a runway,’ recalls Xiaoxiao. ‘But he just built a helicopter that didn't require a runway to get off the ground.’

Apart from farmer Bin, who built his plane as a time-saving way of crop spraying his fields (cannily, he now hires himself and his plane out to other farmers





in the neighbourhood), none of the aeroplanes are built for profit or even a practical purpose. 'One of the builders told me he couldn't explain why he built planes,' says Xiaoxiao. 'He just said it's how human beings evolve. From riding a horse to driving a car and now flying an aeroplane. It's a natural progression. Another told me, "Some men fill their spare time playing mahjong. I prefer making aeroplanes!" They are so passionate about it that for many of them it's become an obsession.'

As a hobby, back yard aeronautics is becoming increasingly popular in China. 'I'd heard of one Chinese farmer in the 1990s who had built a plane but in the last couple of years it seems to have really taken off,' says Xiaoxiao. 'It's mainly middle-aged men who are doing it, but I also interviewed two men in their 60s and 70s who had got the bug.'

Soaring into the blue in a machine built from household junk is an inherently dangerous pastime. But surprisingly, no

deaths have been recorded, although crashes are common. Barber Wang Qiang's engine cut out at a height of 300 metres, forcing him to crash-land in the local river. Not that his ambitions were irrevocably crushed. He simply swam to the bank, calmly used a rope to haul his battered aircraft ashore and went back to the drawing board in his potting shed.

Others suffer more serious consequences from their exploits. Xiaoxiao recounts the story of astronaut Su Guibin (above with



his daughter) who flew into a telegraph pole in 2014, causing severe damage to his nervous system and leaving him paralysed from the waist down. 'He's unable to walk and has been bedridden for two years,' she says softly. 'He doesn't know if he will ever be able to walk again but he told me that if he recovers, the first thing he wants to do is take to the skies in his plane. He said that he dreams about it every night and the prospect of being able to fly again is the only thing that keeps him alive.' Despite seeing the tragic consequences

of taking to the skies in a glorified lawn mower, Xiaoxiao took her own life in her hands and decided to fly Flimsy-Jet herself. 'I felt I had to try to share the joy these men clearly felt, so I went up with Xu Bin in a two-seater plane he'd built,' she says.

'I didn't have a parachute so I was incredibly nervous but once we got airborne and I saw the happiness it brought him, I relaxed and enjoyed the flight. Even though we were flying at 200 metres, it felt very stable. It's an open

cockpit so there was a lot of wind in my hair but seeing the hills and lakes below my feet was really thrilling. It was early evening so the light was beautiful as the setting sun reflected off the lake below. Despite the noise of the engine, I almost reached a moment of Zen.'

And that's definitely something you don't get flying Ryanair.

Aeronautics In The Backyard by Xiaoxiao Xu, eriskayconnection.com