Automotive

Li Shufu

Geely Automobile

Li Shufu was born into a farming family in Taizhou, Zhejiang province. Upon graduating from school, he received a Rmb100 graduation present. With it he bought a camera and a bicycle. These became the tools for a small business taking photos of tourists. Within six months, he had made a tenfold return on his initial investment.

Getting started

His career as an industrialist began by making spare parts for refrigerators in 1984. He then switched to aluminium bending boards, before moving on to produce the first Geely motorcycle in 1994.

In 1997, Li announced he was going into the car industry, a move opposed by many friends and family. He wasn't daunted, regarding a car as no more than "four wheels plus a sofa".

Big Break

Perhaps he was right, since he has built China's biggest private car firm within just one decade.

While most Chinese automakers are controlled by the state and operate via joint ventures set up with more famous foreign brands, Geely is one of only a handful of local brands that are independently run. The company has maintained healthy growth in the domestic market by selling cheaper models. In 2005 Geely went public in Hong Kong.

Although best known for its low-priced cars, the company is working to reinvent itself as an innovator through new-energy and internet-equipped vehicles.

As of 2016, Geely has set up three research centres and four design centres worldwide, hiring more than 4,000 people to carry out R&D. By 2020, new energy vehicles (NEVs) will account for more than 90% of all Geely's sales, the company predicts.

Global drive

Geely is also one of China's biggest car exporters. In 2010, Li bought Swedish car company Volvo from Ford for $1.8 billion. While some worried whether the deal would end up as another failed car acquisition, Li put in place ambitious plans for the company. For Volvo, Geely's target is to double its worldwide sales to 800,000 units a year by 2020, from 373,000 in 2010 (with many of those new sales in China's booming car market). So far the Volvo deals looks to have been a success.

The deal gave a significant boost to Li's ambition to make Geely into a global player. In the same year he also acquired Manganese Bronze from administration. The British firm makes London's iconic black taxis and Li is convinced he can sell the iconic British vehicle to taxi firms around the world.

And to relax

He is one of China's most prominent philanthropists and invested Rmb800 million in the nation's largest private university, Beijing Geely University.

Photo Source: Imagine China

His company Geely acquired Sweden's Volvo as well as London's black cabs

Key info
Li is ranked at 38th on Forbes 2015 China Rich List, with a net worth of $3.6 billion.

Year born
1963

Automotive

Lu Guanqiu

Wanxiang Group

Lu Guanqiu likes it when people label him 'China's first-generation entrepreneur' and, in keeping with his stature as the nation's first capitalist, he is a very rich man.

Getting started

He was born dirt poor in the agricultural village of Ningwei in Zhejiang province and left school at 15 to become a blacksmith's apprentice.

In 1969 the Ningwei Commune asked Lu to take over its farm machinery repair shop. The factory was an 84 square metre shabby mess, but from such things are great fortunes built. He sold all his belongings, built a house next to the plant and injected Rmb4,000 – staking his entire fate on its success. He specialised in making universal joints and branded his product Qianchao. He took local market share by refusing to raise prices and ratcheting down costs – something his less aggressive competitors found tough to match.

Big break

Lu's firm – now named the Wanxiang Group – began participating in trade fairs (like the famous Canton Fair) and began to develop new varieties of joint. Soon he was selling in 18 countries. In 1994 he got permission from the Ministry of Foreign Trade to set up a company in the US.

Wanxiang is now China's biggest auto parts manufacturer. The company, which employs more than 30,000 people, has diversified into various fields including mining and has 22 companies in 10 countries. In 1999 Lu set a target to make daily profits of Rmb10 million by 2009, which he achieved. He then set a new '10-fold in a decade struggle' plan: by 2019 he wants to be making Rmb100 million of daily profits, with his best paid employee earning Rmb100 million annually.

To get there, Lu added carmaking to his growing portfolio. In the last 10 years the businessman has injected millions of dollars in developing alternative fuel vehicles. In 2013, Wanxiang bought American firm Fisker Automotive at a bankruptcy auction. The company is planning to build electric cars in the US to take on Tesla Motors on its home turf.

"I'll put every cent that Wanxiang earns into making electric vehicles," Lu told Bloomberg in an interview in 2014. "I'll burn as much cash as it takes to succeed, or until Wanxiang goes bust."

Need to know

Lu is up by 5.10am each day. Staff prepare 30,000 words of reading materials for him from the major press and on auto industry related subjects. According to the Today Morning Express he has a 10 square metre office – probably the smallest among his billionaire peer group in China.

When he does have spare time he works on his 'Four-10,000' charity which helps large groups of orphans, poverty-stricken students, children with disabilities, and the elderly.

Photo Source: Imagine China

He has vowed to invest every cent of his company to take on Tesla

Key info
According to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, Lu is worth $6.4 billion (as of August 2016).

Year born
1945

Automotive

Yin Mingshan

Lifan Industry Group

Born in 1938, Yin Mingshan entered business somewhat late in life. Caught up in the political chaos of the Cultural Revolution, he was banished from his native Chongqing to work on a farm until he was rehabilitated in 1979. He then worked as an English teacher, before taking a job with a publishing house, which led to his first commercial success as one of Chongqing's biggest private booksellers.

Getting started

At the age of 54, Yin decided to shift into a completely different industry, when he set up Chongqing Hongda Institute of Vehicle Accessories. The company made motorcycles that resembled Honda bikes but at cut-price levels. Sales were good, and a few years later, the company started exporting to places such as Vietnam and Laos.

Yin then set up a series of companies that were restructured into Lifan Hongda Industry (Group). Another change in name was just around the corner after a lawsuit from Honda forced Yin to abandon the 'Hongda' brand.

Big break

Lawsuits notwithstanding, Lifan was on a roll. The group has built a large network of manufacturing facilities, sales companies and overseas subsidiaries. The next step was to move into making cars, and in 2006 the company released a five-seat sedan that sold for less than Rmb50,000.

Yin believes that the revenue from the car business will become five times bigger than its motorcycle operations in the future. The Lifan brand however, will remain his main focus. In November 2010, Lifan finally went public in Shanghai – the first privately-run automaker to do so – raising Rmb2.9 billion.

Global drive

Since 1998 when Lifan got its licence to export motorcycles (again, one of the earliest private-sector automobile firms to do so), it has been expanding in international markets. The company now sells its products in 117 countries. In fact, it has been the best selling Chinese carmaker in Russia in the five consecutive years to 2015 (it sold more than 7,500 cars in the first half of last year).

In 2015, Lifan's revenue exceeded Rmb30 billion from sales of 230,000 cars and 1.31 million motorcycles at home and abroad.

Need to know

In 2003, Yin was elected vice president of Chongqing's Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, becoming the first private entrepreneur to become the provincial leader of the CPPCC, an advisory body to the Chinese government.

Yin is the major sponsor behind the Chongqing Lifan Football Club, which is now competing in the Chinese Super League. Meanwhile, Lifan is also the third biggest shareholder in Hong Kong-listed Chongqing Bank. The automaker is also among the many private-sector firms with an ambition to establish its own bank.

Photo Source: Imagine China

Lifan was the first private-sector automaker to go public in China

Key info

Yin is worth Rmb16 billion according to the 2015 Hurun Rich List.

Year born

1938

Automotive

Wang Chuanfu

BYD Company

Photo Source: Imagine China

Born in 1966, Wang Chuanfu started his career in a lab coat. He first graduated as a chemist from Central South Industrial University of Technology, before receiving a master's degree from Beijing Non-Ferrous Research Institute.

Getting started

The academic life was not for Wang: in 1995, he quit a research job to set up BYD. The abbreviation has variously been interpreted as 'Build Your Dreams' and 'Brings You Dollars', although Wang admits it has "no special meaning".

The Rmb2.5 million seed money was borrowed from Wang's cousin Lu Xianyang (who also gets an entry in this publication).

The company's first product was rechargeable batteries, primarily for mobile phones. Wang soon succeeded with his plan to make top quality batteries at a price that undercut established manufacturers in Japan and South Korea. BYD remains one of the world's biggest makers of rechargeable batteries.

Big Break

Off the back of this success, BYD listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange in 2002. But investors thinking that they were taking a punt on a battery maker received a shock when Wang decided to branch into an entirely new area – electric cars. His vision was to create a global automobile brand that would be at the forefront of a new wave of green technology. His goal was ambitious, to say the least: to become the world's largest carmaker by 2025. It might have sounded like a pipe-dream, but people started to take a real interest when Warren Buffett bought 10% of BYD in September 2008. As a result, the company's share price rocketed, to the extent that Wang topped the Hurun Rich list in 2009.

Setbacks

The following years however, proved to be something of a disappointment, as BYD lost more market shares to foreign auto brands, which mostly produced locally with state-run partners. As BYD's sales slowed, its sales network took a hit too, with nearly 1,000 dealers pulling out.

BYD's share price slumped as well. At one point in 2012 it traded at one fifth of its heady level in 2009. Worse, in May 2012 the firm faced negative publicity after a deadly accident involving one of its electric vehicles.

The Sage of Omaha has proved a loyal shareholder. He's said he wants to keep his stake for "many years" – and rather morbidly – until "past [his] lifetime".

BYD's prospect have improved more recently thanks to the Chinese government's effort to encourage the sales of new energy vehicles (in 2015 BYD topped the global ranking for electric vehicles sales, beating Tesla). In July 2016 BYD announced that Korean giant Samsung is in talks to acquire a stake in the company. That would make Samsung the second largest foreign shareholder behind Berkshire Hathaway.

Charlie Munger sees Wang as a combination of Henry Ford, Thomas Edison and Bill Gates

Key info
According to China Business News, Wang is China's 9th richest man as of August 2016 worth Rmb30 billion.

Year born
1966

Automotive

Cao Dewang

Fuyao Glass

Also known by his Cantonese name, Cho Tak-wong, Cao Dewang was born in Shanghai in 1946 to a wealthy business family from Fujian province. However, after the Communist Party took power in 1949, his family lost everything and returned to their hometown.

Getting started

Cao started school aged nine but had to quit at 14. His business education began on the streets, cycling a round-trip of 80km to sell fruit in his native Fuqing city. He spent some time as a chef before landing a job in 1976 at state-owned glass factory. In 1983 he was asked to take over the failing factory by the local government. He turned it around, changing its name to Fuyao Glass.

Big Break

Cao listed his firm in Shanghai in 1993. Since then, it has become China's largest exporter of automotive glass. The company not only controls more than half of the Chinese market, it operates internationally too: it has supplied motoring heavyweights such as Audi, Ford and Hyundai.

With offices all over the world – such as in the US, Japan and South Korea – Fuyao is well placed to service its portfolio of international clients. On the domestic front, it boasts production facilities in all of China's major economic centres, along with factories in more developing areas.

In early 2010, Cao announced that the company was entering its "Mid-Cao Dewang Period", where he would take more of a backseat role. The plan: Cao remains in charge of development strategies, while the management of the business is handled by his son.

In 2014, Cao became the biggest Chinese investor in Ohio when Fuyao Glass bought an old General Motors factory in Dayton for $200 million. The move has been hailed by Chinese media as an example of how Chinese investment has created jobs for the Americans. The 150,000 square-metre factory "used to be a dark and deserted place except for a few raccoons", China Daily reported, but is now reborn. The plant is working toward a goal of achieving full production capacity in 2016, and will hire up to 2,000 American workers by 2017.

Need to know

In 2009, Cao was thrust into the spotlight when he became the first Chinese businessperson to become Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur of the Year. The judges were swayed not only by his considerable business prowess, but also by his commitment to charity. He made a large personal donation to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake relief effort, before pledging to donate around 60% of his interest in Fuyao (the company's market capitalisation stands at Rmb43 billion as of August 2016) to his own charitable foundation.

And to relax

Golf is his sole hobby. He usually tees off at 4am; with golf course staff apparently lighting the course with torches.

Photo Source: Imagine China

"I want to build a Fuyao for the American people, as the country's car glass industry is in decline"

Key info

Cao has donated up to Rmb6 billion to charity, according to Hurun, but he is still worth Rmb10 billion.

Year born

1946

Automotive

Wei Jianjun

Great Wall Motors

Wei Jianjun was born in 1964 in Beijing but moved with his family to Baoding in Hebei province. His father then left the army to become a businessman and Wei dropped out of school to join the family pump business.

Getting started

When Wei was 26 he signed a contract with the local government to take over a debt-ridden company – Great Wall Industry, which was involved in the car business. Wei launched a Great Wall sedan in 1993, using chassis and engines from other carmakers. The low price attracted customers but a new policy in 1994 stopped carmakers outside the "national catalogue" from producing sedans. Great Wall didn't make the list.

Big break

A business trip to Thailand saved the company. Seeing pick-up trucks on the Thai roads, Wei was inspired to make his own. From 1996, the new Wingle model targeted small business owners and farmers in rural areas. By 1998 Great Wall pick-ups were a market leader and they remain a bestseller today. Great Wall Motors listed in Hong Kong in 2003 and on the A-share market in Shanghai in 2010.

Encouraged by his success in wider wheel-base pick- ups, Wei began making SUVs. His Haval brand gained a reputation for decent quality at a much cheaper price than imported equivalents. This successful strategic move made Great Wall the fastest growing of China's homegrown car producers.

According to New Fortune, a domestic Chinese-language magazine, Wei is China's 9th richest man with a net worth of Rmb47 billion.

Working style

Wei's management style sounds regimented in the extreme. Employees have to move around the factory at a designated speed ("seven steps in five seconds") and risk punishment for getting out of elevators on the wrong floors. There's also more than a hint of a Big Brother presence with a mysterious 'spy department' monitoring daily operations. It has sweeping powers, fining workers who forget to switch off their computers at night or punishing staff who ride motorbikes into work without their helmets.

Need to know

Wei was one of the privileged Party members to vote on the new leadership line-up at the 18th National Party Congress in October 2012, making him one of a rare breed of billionaire businessmen with direct access to the highest echelons of power.

Wei Jianjun's motto is "improve a little everyday", and the motto is printed all over the company, even on the canteen's tea cups. But Wei relaxes by collecting cars: he says he has bought at least 30 foreign luxury cars to study their engines but has since given them to friends, and now drives only a Great Wall SUV.

He also likes table tennis because it's "a low cost sport".

Wei is one of the privileged few to have voted to pick Xi Jinping as the Chinese leader in 2012

Key info
As of August 2016, Great Wall's market value stood at Rmb80 billion, roughly one third of its peak value a year earlier.

Year born
1964

Automotive

Zuo Zongshen

Zongshen Industrial

Zuo Zongshen was born in Shanghai in 1952 and grew up in Chongqing. Like many people his age, he was sent to a rural area during the Cultural Revolution. Later he took a job as a kiln worker in a Chongqing porcelain factory. He then dabbled with more entrepreneurial pursuits, selling books and fruit.

Getting started

At the age of 30, Zuo started to learn how to repair motorcycles. He turned out to be a natural: "When a motorbike passed by I could tell if the engine had got problems just by listening," he recalls.

In 1982 Zuo opened his own motorcycle repair shop. He started to reassemble the engines himself, winning a series of contracts with a local motorcycle plant. After a decade accumulating capital and experience, Zuo founded Zongshen Motorcycle Industrial.

Big break

Zuo was in the right place to do so: by 2010 Chongqing was estimated to be making half of China's motorbikes. Back in the 1990s, his firm started out producing engines for others, before launching its own 70cc brand in 1996. With sales passing Rmb3 billion by 2000, Zongshen was a major player in Chongqing, and began to export.

Unfortunately Zuo was hit by the global financial crisis in 2008. Orders fell 60% and production lines, which normally ran day and night, slowed. "I couldn't sleep for months," Zuo told the Economic Observer. "Then I realised we needed to make changes."

One change was to target new countries, as sales in traditional markets were suffering. In 2009 Zuo invested in Thailand to build a production base and he then took over Brazilian brand Kasinki, the third largest local motorcycle maker, as part of a Brazilian joint venture called Zongshen CR.

In the Chinese market, a ban on motorcycles in more than 170 cities hit manufacturers, many of whom have tried to diversify into other businesses. But Zuo continues to believe there is still growth to come, especially in the rural areas. "China has a large population with limited space," he warns. "Compared to cars, the motorcycle is more convenient and efficient, and it could be more environmentally-friendly."

In 2016, Zongshen announced a plan to invest at least Rmb2 billion to acquire foreign aviation firms. The company wants to expand its business to general aviation, unmanned aerial vehicles and robots. According to Zuo's new game plan, sales from the new businesses will account for 80% of the company's revenue by 2022.

Need to know

Zuo is a huge fan of the Harley-Davidson brand and has a collection of Harleys at home. He also owns a motorbike team that has competed in the Moto GP world championship since 1999, ranking in the top 10.

Photo Source: Imagine China

Zuo is a huge fan of the Harley-Davidson brand and has a collection of Harleys at home

Key info
According to the 2015 Hurun Rich List Zuo has a net worth of Rmb13 billion.

Year born
1952