

LIFE

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Song Zhenghuan can't stop smiling as he watches a steady stream of models leisurely push various styles of modern-looking baby stroller down the runway at a show in Shanghai.

Song looks full of vigor and enthusiasm at the 30th anniversary celebration of his baby product business.

The man, in his 70s now, wouldn't have dreamed of becoming a "king" of baby strollers more than three decades ago.

Born into a family that had practiced traditional Chinese medicine for the past 36 generations, Song never thought that he would go into business in the first place.

"My mother was a well-known fertility doctor, and she told me to use my 10 fingers and 24 ribs to establish myself within society," Song says.

Under his family influence, Song says he learned to do things that were required of him on his own, no matter how difficult they were.

"Also, nothing cannot be solved if you are diligent enough," he says.

Song then became a math teacher at Lujia town middle school in Jiangsu province's Kunshan after graduating from Suzhou Normal College in 1973.

His diligence and sense of responsibility paid off at the school.

"Students I taught stood out in test scores, and many were fighting to be in my class," Song says.

Before long, the school authority made him vice-principal.

He could have had an uneventful career if it wasn't for a microwave oven factory. The plant was intrinsically tied to the school in the 1970s, but by 1988 was on the verge of bankruptcy and more than 1 million yuan (\$140,000) in debt — some of which had been borrowed from 108 of the school's faculty members.

Concerns over the potential loss of their money saw some of those teachers lodge complaints with the local education bureau.

With nowhere else to turn, the bureau officials approached Song and asked him to take over the plant's business.

"My hands were tied at that time," Song recalls.

"I was teaching math, and knew next to nothing about economy."

Things were worse than he could have anticipated. The plant had about 40 employees, all of whom had not received a salary for eight months.

Song began to make frequent visits to Shanghai, over two hours away by bus, looking for business opportunities, but to no avail.

Then, completely out of the blue, an official from a Shanghai-based military plant brought a baby stroller to Song.

"He told me that if our plant can produce it, his plant could take care of the sales," Song recounts.

He grasped the opportunity with both hands.

In 1989, Song loaned 50,000 yuan from the bank and began to focus on baby stroller production. Unfortunately, the relationship with the military plant soon hit bumpy ground and ended, as the military plant had trouble of its own.

"We had already purchased a lot of the materials for (stroller) production, and there was no way back," Song says.

Wheely good ideas



Song Zhenghuan is the man whose innovations have changed the design of baby carriages forever, and turned transporting kids into a stroll.

“We had already purchased a lot of the materials for (stroller) production, and there was no way back. We didn't have the money and the only way out was innovation.”

Song Zhenghuan
president of Goodbaby



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Song found that baby strollers were quite simple, made of bamboo or wood, and they didn't look particularly appealing.

"It was just a chair with wheels and could only be used for transportation," he says.

In the 1990s, people were looking for items with multiple functions. The more, the merrier.

Song acutely picked up the trend, turning his hand to devising a multi-purpose stroller.

He hit the library to study structure and played around with every possibility before developing a viable plan. Inspiration came to him when he found a sleeping couch in a magazine. Song figured that, if wheels were added to a cradle and could be rolled up and down, the whole thing could double up as a stroller and a cradle.

"That way, parents could also soothe their children and let them sleep in the stroller," he says. Song quickly got down to fleshing out his improvised idea.

Thanks to his early years in rural China, Song was good with his hands and eventually, through much trial and error, built a working prototype, for which he obtained a patent.

He sold the patent for 40,000 yuan, which was the first time he'd struck gold since he took the helm

of the plant. "We didn't have the capacity for production, so I used the patent money to give our plant a face-lift and build the morale among remaining employees," Song says.

This early success encouraged him to continue to develop his ideas, adding more functions to the baby strollers. He later patented a version that had four functions, including as a walking aid.

The patent price reached up to 150,000 yuan in a bidding war in Shenzhen, Guangdong province.

When Song saw the astronomical figure, the penny suddenly dropped and he finally saw the potential of his design. So, he called the bidding off and sought investment from the bank and local government to buy raw materials and tools to build his four-function stroller.

At the same time, he went out of his way to show his new product at a Changsha exhibition in September 1989.

"It was on the walkway between booths of two major domestic baby stroller producers," Song recalls.

However, it was his unique stroller, with its various functions, that drew the attention of visitors.

"We got orders for 200,000 strollers on the spot," Song says.

About two months later, the first of his baby strollers officially went on the market.

He named his brand Goodbaby.

His problems, it seemed, were not yet over. The price of the Goodbaby stroller was 150 yuan, while mainstream products cost around 50 yuan at that time.

Unwilling to compromise product quality, Song targeted the high-end market. He had his eyes on the Shanghai No 1 Department Store, which, at the time, was one of the biggest of its kind in Chinese mainland.

Yet, Song got dismissed by the store's manager.

"We were not exactly a household name, and the price was a bit steep," he says.

Thinking on his feet, Song came up with a cunning plan. He started demonstrating the functions of his brand-new stroller on the overpass right outside the mall, grabbing the attention of passersby.

"When they asked me where I got it, I told them it was from the store," he says.

As time went by, an increasing number of people were inquiring after his products at the store, which eventually convinced the store of their sales potential.

"It was the key which opened up all the channels," he says.

That first breakthrough made things easier for Song's products to find their way into major shopping malls across the country, and sales began to rocket.

In 1991, Song paid off the debt, and two years later, Goodbaby strollers raked in 110 million yuan in sales, ranking first among its peers.

Just when Song thought he was able to rest on his laurels and enjoy his success, a German client gave him a rude awakening.

He told Song that plants abroad had automatic production lines, with higher efficiency and a more consistent product quality, while almost everything in Song's plant was manual.

It prompted Song to check out the international competition.

After seeing an automated stroller production line during a visit to Japan in 1992, Song decided that something needed to be done back home.

"My goal was to improve, not to make money, because we would have no market if those good foreign goods were here," he says.

However, his initial plan of introducing a Japanese production line and joining forces with foreign capital investors both hit the wall, but, it was Song's innovation that once again solved the problem.

The United States' second biggest baby products company, Cosco, decided to partner with Song after he developed a stroller where the cradle could swing both in an arch and a linear trajectory.

"It took both sides 15 minutes to hammer out a deal," Song says.

"Every year since then, we roll out new products, and all of them are revolutionary," Song states proudly.

To date, products from the joint venture have proved incredibly successful in the US. From there, it was plain sailing for Song to make inroads in the European market.

Song, however, was not satisfied, because his products were popular in overseas market, but his brand was not.

In 2014, Song brought Martin Pos on board to help with his company's product upgrade and its global branding.

Pos, from Germany, had founded his own company, Cybex, in 2005 and had been a major global baby car seat producer.

They met at a baby product fair in Germany in 2005.

Song spoke highly of Pos' venture at the fair and encouraged him to keep on with it.

"I had just started up my own business then and he was already a technology leader and an icon of the industry," Pos remembers.

"He gave me a lot of courage and mentorship, and we developed a relationship like that of a father and son."

Pos says his agreement to work with Song is, in a large part, due to the mutual trust they have for one another.

"He (Song) is very determined, but also easy to work with and full of love."

With the advent of the second-child policy, Song has seen the potential of the Chinese market and says that he will continue to develop new and better products to tap into it.

Goodbaby's new flagship shop opened in Shanghai on Oct 26, where shoppers will find baby products and books.

Baby insurance and fashion will also be introduced in future.

"We hope to develop an all-value chain, offering all the services required by families with babies."

One thing is for sure, with Song's passion, enthusiasm and innovative spirit, it is sure to be stroll.



With the advent of the second-child policy, Song Zhenghuan has seen the potential of the Chinese market and says that he will continue to develop new and better products to tap into it. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

First for Guizhou as province makes top 10 in Lonely Planet's regional list

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Southwest China's Guizhou province made the Lonely Planet's top 10 regions to visit in 2020.

The travel guidance publisher in China released the announcement Oct 22.

Its brand and marketing manager Li Muze says: "Guizhou is sometimes ignored by tourists, but it actually has many hidden interesting experiences."

The tempting street food, artifact boutique, and coffee and craft bars

are among the highlights, Li says. "Visitors can also go to the depths of minority ethnic villages, where pile dwellings remain the way they were centuries ago."

Every year, Lonely Planet publishes the regions list that was jointly made by its employees from its writers, bloggers and publishing partners from around the world.

The Central Asian Silk Road; Le Marche in Italy; Tohoku in Japan; Maine in the United States; Lord Howe Island in Australia; Cadiz Province in Spain; Northeast Argentina; Kvarner Gulf in Croatia and Brazilian Amazon also made the list.

New transport means, visa policy, travel and gourmet experiences are considered in developing the list, Li says.

Now, high-speed rail allows visitors to experience modernity and primitive folk customs in Guizhou from Chongqing or Yunnan province's capital Kunming in a couple of hours.

"The list can help travelers from far and wide to better understand the destination," Li says.

In recent years, with the rapid development of Guizhou's tourism industry, its mountainous landscapes and rich ethnic culture have

43.41 billion

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made the province a hot destination for tourists from all over the world.

The province received more than 28.56 million tourist visits during the National Day holiday, which ended on Oct 7, a year-on-year

increase of 23.91 percent, local authority reports.

Tourism revenue during the holiday reached 43.41 billion yuan (\$6.13 billion), up 30.69 percent year-on-year.

The province has tapped its rich mountainous resources to develop tourism over the years.

International mountain races have been held to bring travelers closer to Guizhou's natural charm and pristine folk customs. Local government has also developed sightseeing, leisure and health preservation experiences to spice up visitor experience.

Lonely Planet's Top 10 travel regions to visit in 2020

1. Central Asian Silk Road
2. Le Marche, Italy
3. Tohoku, Japan
4. Maine, US
5. Lord Howe Island, Australia
6. Guizhou, China
7. Cadiz Province, Spain
8. Northeast Argentina
9. Kvarner Gulf, Croatia
10. Brazilian Amazon