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Backed by an idea and a killer algorithm, Chinese students launch Singapore-based start-up

In the latest installment of a special series looking at Singapore's burgeoning start-up scene, a pair of NUS School of Computing graduates from China explain how they hit on a start-up idea in their final year, and have embarked on their entrepreneurship journey in Singapore.

By Linette Lim

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Tuitui co-founders Ju Chaoran and Zhao Liang. (Photo: Linette Lim)

SINGAPORE: Imagine you are trying to decide where to go for dinner. Your phone beeps to tell you a newly-opened restaurant nearby is offering free Peking duck. You open up the app to read more, and in addition it gives you list of deals and promotions based on your GPS coordinates.

This is what real-time, location and algorithm based deals aggregator app Tuitui promises to do, when it launches within the next month. Tuitui, which translates to 'push-push' in Mandarin, is



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so-named because it uses push notifications on smartphones to alert users whenever they are deals nearby.

“During weekdays, the service capacity is usually not fully utilised in shops. So some merchants will have the need to push very attractive, exclusive promotions to get customers in,” said co-founder Zhao Liang.

He added: “We will only selectively target potential consumers so that push notifications are useful, not annoying.”

While there are apps in the marketplace that perform similar functions, like HungryDeals and Groupon, Mr Zhao believe Tuitui is unique because it focuses on shopping malls and is backed by a killer algorithm.

Explaining that Tuitui's competitive edge lies in its ability to leverage big data analytics, Mr Zhao said the app can identify which users to push what type of promotions to. This is made possible because the app's algorithm takes into consideration several factors besides user location, including search history and the frequency of app use.

The 25 year-old, a graduate of the National University of Singapore's School of Computing, said the idea for Tuitui was seeded in his final year of studies in 2014.

“It started out as an idea to help promote perishable products and eliminate food wastage,” said Mr Zhao, referring to sushi and pastries that are heavily marked down for sale after a certain time in the day.

By Jan 2016, the app evolved into an aggregator for shopping malls, because it made more sense for a lean start-up to deals with malls instead of individual shops.

“The malls gather information on deals and promotions from their shop tenants and put this out on their individual websites. But very few shopping malls have an in-house mobile app, and it's not also feasible for consumers to download an app for each mall,” he explained.

“So a neutral mobile app, which acts as an information integrator, is in need - for both shopping malls and consumers.”

Tuitui's aim is to cover the 100-odd malls in Singapore, as well as gain a critical mass of about 30,000 users. After it has hit these two milestones, Mr Zhao said the firm wants to monetise by charging malls and tenants to send push notifications.

It will then also consider expanding to other Southeast Asian markets, like Indonesia and Malaysia. He does not intend to introduce Tuitui to his native China in the early stage for two reasons. He has no immediate plans to leave Singapore, and there is a possibility that big tech



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players there - Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent - can develop a copycat app and corner the Chinese market based on their scale.

Tuitui was co-founded with Mr Ju Chaoran, Mr Zhao's friend of seven years and a batchmate at the NUS School of Computing. Both of them have been working full-time on Tuitui for two years now, taking care of every aspect of the business, from programming to accounting, and meeting investors and mall managers.

"I sleep on the floor of our office a lot," Mr Zhao admits, when asked about life as an entrepreneur.

"We both write code. But we didn't know how to build a mobile app at the time. So we had to go teach ourselves. And we had to learn two operating systems as well! iOS and Android," he said with a laugh.

A third co-founder is Mr Zhao's former university lecturer, Associate Professor of Information Systems Jack Zhenhui Jiang, who acts as Tuitui's advisor and mentor.

Mr Zhao, who has been living here since arriving seven years ago on a Singapore Government scholarship, plans to stay put and grow his business from Singapore.

This is because Singapore has a conducive business environment and supportive infrastructure, in the form of the Government's Smart Nation push, he said.

"Culturally speaking, I'm more familiar with Singapore than with China by now. I'm also more comfortable with the social norms and government regulations here," said the Hainan native, adding that his parents are supportive of his venture.

Mr Zhao counts tech titans Masayoshi Son of SoftBank and Elon Musk of Tesla as sources of inspiration.

He said, "I'm determined to make it work. For an IT professional, what can be more exciting than to use IT to shape the world, and make it a better place?"

Tuitui is being supported by Mediacorp's incubator programme, the Mediapreneur (<http://www16.mediacorp.sg/themediapreneur/>), which provides start-ups with seed funding, a working space, mentoring, networking opportunities and attractive media packages to speed up their growth and development.

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/business/singapore/backed-by-an-idea-and-a/2877666.html>