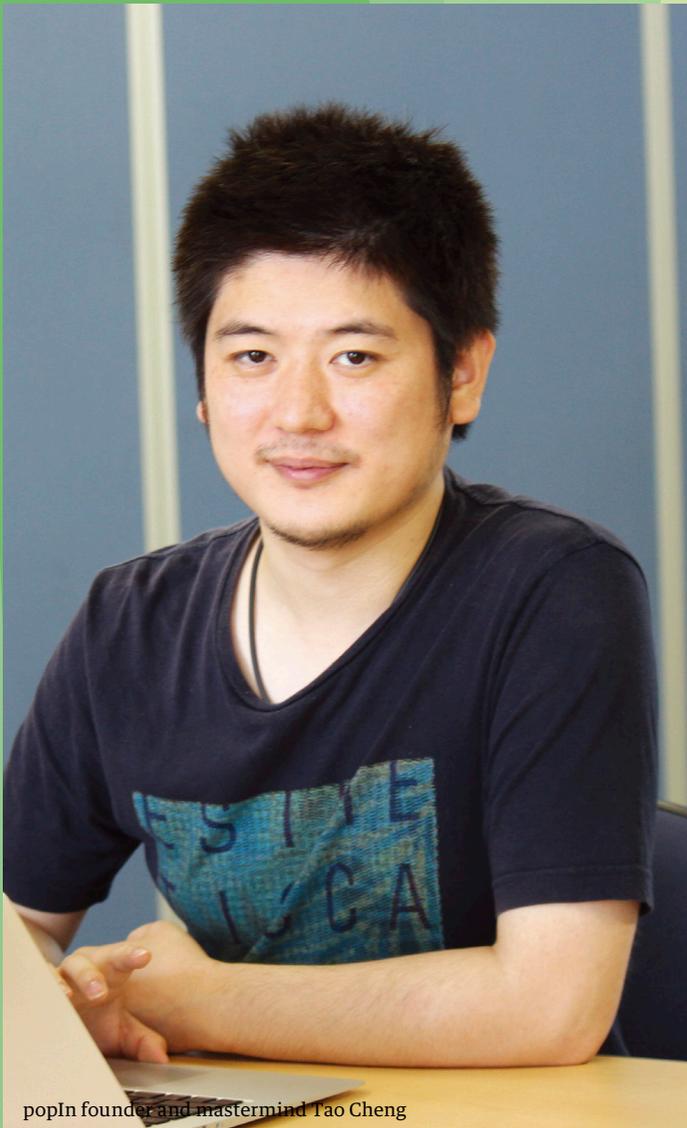


Making a Mark with popIn

Tao Cheng thinks differently

FREJA CHOO



popIn founder and mastermind Tao Cheng

THE University of Tokyo-based venture company popIn Inc. started with a patented invention of Tao Cheng's: a site search technology he called "popIn" because it enables search results to display instantly in the same window when the cursor hovers over a word.

"We offer our clients an analytics tool that can measure the quality of their page view," Cheng explains. "By analyzing how users browse web content, our clients—who are mostly in the online media industry—can optimize their content to match user needs."

Born and raised in China's Henan Province, Cheng came to study in Japan believing that Japan's higher educational environment would give him the opportunity to achieve his full potential. "And the culture is close enough to feel familiar, but different enough to allow a unique experience," Cheng says.

In 2008, Cheng was enrolled in the master's degree program in creative informatics at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Information Science and Technology. The-then 26-year-old student entrepreneur sensed the time was right to turn his ideas into action after he and other University of Tokyo students had the chance to present their technologies in Silicon Valley in front of experts from Stanford and UC Berkeley, among others.

"Out of a dozen presentations, my idea was one of the most favorably received—the technology was something that didn't exist at the time," says Cheng, who names Steve Jobs as his role model. He subsequently raised forty million yen to fund his startup from the University of Tokyo's venture capital fund, Edge Capital EIR Scheme.

Six years later, Cheng has turned his patented technology into a commercial product, and popIn now has around sixty clients. He leads a ten-member team consisting of people from various countries in an office with a cool and casual vibe.

“I worked at about ten different Japanese IT startups before founding popIn,” says Cheng. “They taught me the importance of teamwork and perseverance, and showed me why some ventures failed while others survived. Of course as a non-Japanese entrepreneur there were many obstacles, but I imagine there would have been many more without the help of the people I was lucky enough to meet.” Through the connections he’d made during summer internships and all those part-time jobs, he was able to assemble the key members of his original team. These connections also led to several key clients, which gave Cheng his first taste of commercial success.

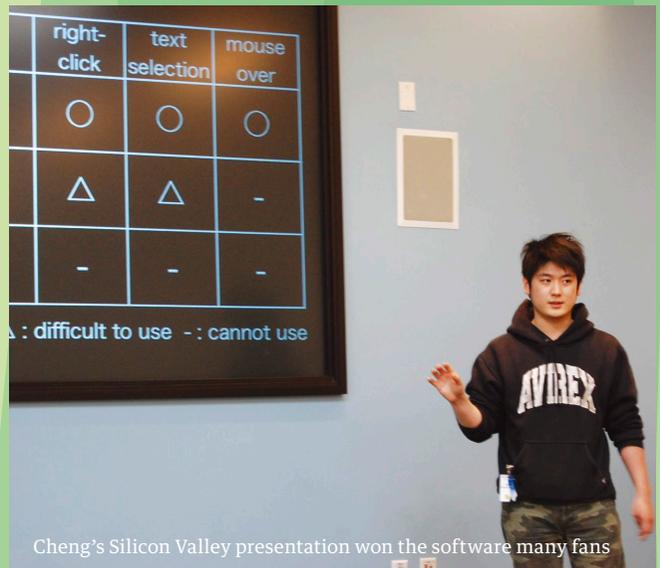
Being a non-native speaker of Japanese did not deter the multitasking CEO from taking up marketing and sales. “When new clients meet me, they don’t really care that I am a foreigner or when I founded my company. I think if you have a really great product, people in Japan recognize that,” Cheng concludes.

The University of Tokyo’s brand value also helps inspire trust from new clients, he adds. popIn’s office on the seventh floor of the University of Tokyo Entrepreneur Plaza—a building with state-of-the-art facilities located inside the university’s campus—offers a glimpse into the startup support Cheng received from the university.

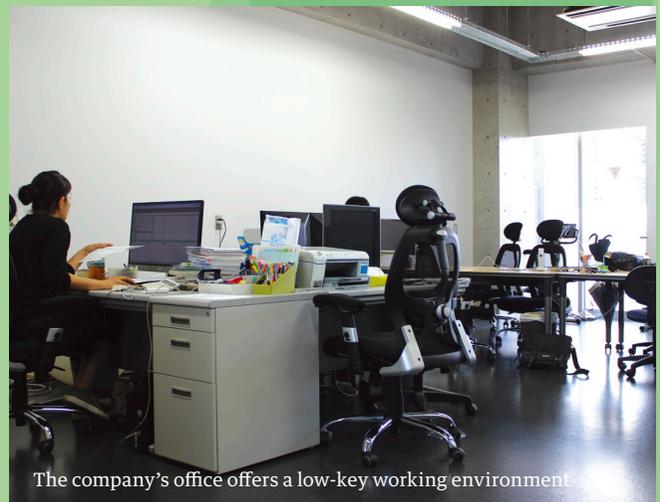
Cheng agrees that the startup environment in Japan has become much more positive recently. “All the new stuff has been coming from places like Silicon Valley,” Cheng notes. “But I want to be one of the first Asian companies to reverse this trend by bringing new technology to the U.S. and spreading it globally.” 



The original team at popIn



Cheng’s Silicon Valley presentation won the software many fans



The company’s office offers a low-key working environment