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MICHAEL TEGOS

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PHOTO CREDIT: MATTHEW W. JACKSON

There's no doubt in anyone's mind about Singapore being an excellent place to start a business. Stable politically as well as financially, rich in investment and support, and an easy place to set up an enterprise, it sounds like an entrepreneur's paradise. But for some Singaporeans, it's not the promised land of entrepreneurship. The original land of promise, the United States, still beckons with its siren's call.

The call was irresistible for Desmond Lim. The Singaporean entrepreneur moved to the US to complete a master's degree in public policy, business, and government at Harvard University. He also worked at the MIT Media Lab for a while until earlier this year. "I really wanted to come to the US for school because I felt there was so much more to learn," he tells *Tech in Asia*. "I think Singapore is great, I learned so much there, but I feel it's small – there's so much more to learn in the world."

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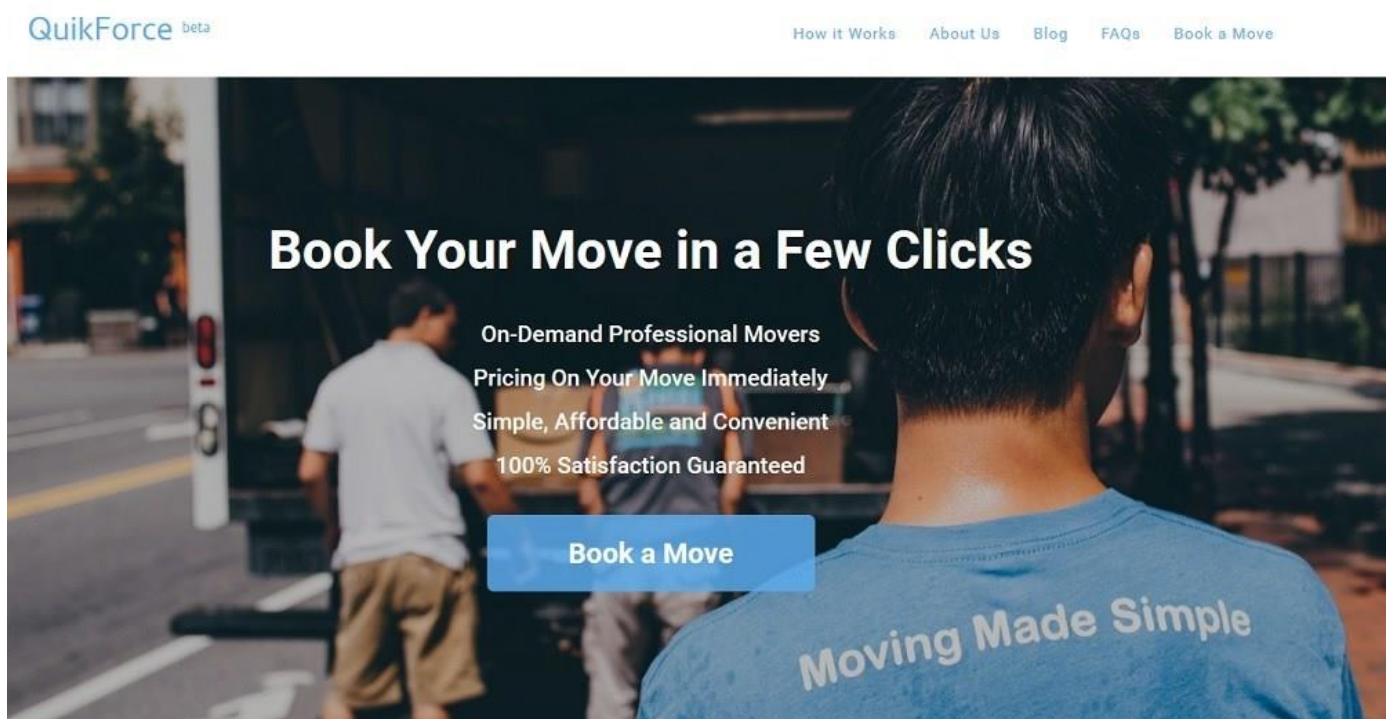
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Unlike a lot of his peers, Desmond didn't choose Silicon Valley for his next step. While living in Boston, he founded a new startup called Quikforce. It connects users to moving companies, allowing them to get the entire process of a move done through the site. It also implemented a software-as-a-service solution for movers that was warmly received by them. The startup is working with more than 50 movers in Boston and recently expanded to Miami. Desmond says it has so far generated more than US\$50,000 in revenue and has facilitated over 100 moves.

Quikforce was named after his father's one-van operation back in Singapore. "My father has been a mover for the past 35 years," he says. "Both my parents barely finished school, and they don't know how to use technology to do their job well. That's why I wanted Quikforce to help people like my dad to do their job better." In August, Desmond pitched Quikforce at TechCrunch's NYC Meetup + Pitch-Off in New York, the only startup by an Asian founder there.

College on no money

Desmond knows a bit about enterprise. After finishing high school in Singapore, his family told him they couldn't afford to send him to university. So he decided to work part-time tutoring other students. It wasn't long before he surpassed the 35-student mark – the next step was to make money by matching them to other tutors. He did that for two years and made enough to fund his studies.



While studying business and finance at Singapore Management University (SMU), Desmond started a Thai restaurant. He ran the 70-seater with a crew of 10 to 15 people for three years before selling it during his senior year. Following that, he ran a business importing clothes from Thailand and China to Singapore. In the middle of all that, he became the first person in his family to get a university degree.

Back in 2007, as part of a school trip with SMU, he visited various tech companies in Silicon Valley, including Google and Apple. "I held the first iPhone in my hands when it wasn't even out yet," he says excitedly. After graduation and a short stint at Merrill Lynch in Singapore, the way pointed across the Pacific.

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Different strokes

The US was attractive for a lot of reasons, according to Desmond, not least the potential market size for a business. “Even if I had a tech business that was doing really well [in Singapore], how would I scale it?” he wonders. Of course it’s not like other companies haven’t been able to do it – GrabTaxi co-founder Anthony Tan, whom Desmond knew at Harvard, has done a pretty good job of scaling his company in the region. But taking a company from Singapore and growing it beyond, in different markets, with different languages and cultures, is a considerable challenge, Desmond believes.

On the flipside, the US is a huge market with not that many differences from state to state. Quikforce has recently expanded to Miami and Desmond says he is approached by people from cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and even New York to expand there. Not that it’s all roses – what differences there are can sometimes be as challenging. “Every state has its own laws and its own quirks,” he says.

For example, even the time of year people move can make an impact on a business trying to work with movers in different cities. In Boston, there’s a surge of moving during the summer as students move into town to attend one of its prestigious universities. New York, on the other hand, has people moving in and out all year round, but due to real estate being limited, sometimes moves are booked very last-minute. “I think as I scale, that will be one of my so-called barriers to growth,” Desmond explains.



QUIKFORCE FOUNDER, DESMOND LIM.

The much-bemoaned shortage of developer talent in Singapore is another minus for the city-state. It has been the talk of the town this past year, highlighted by Compass’ Startup Ecosystem Ranking 2015 report in the summer. On the contrary, in Boston a startup has access to talent coming straight out of Harvard, MIT, and Boston University. Boston itself is no Silicon Valley in terms of its startup industry or – importantly – funding, but there are still plenty of resources available to founders.

Desmond also feels a company benefits from the difference in cultures between the East and West. “I think people in the US are very direct – if they think your idea sucks, they will tell you straight,” he says. This has allowed him to move and grow faster, he explains – being nice to everyone all the time isn’t always the best way to run a company.

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“It’s not easy to integrate in the ecosystem here, but I’ve worked very hard,” he adds. “The US is still fairly open to foreigners culture-wise, but I do feel that in terms of Asian entrepreneurs in the US, we are still very few.” Desmond names Razer founder Min-Liang Tan, who happened to be his senior at the same Singapore high school, as an inspiration when it comes to Singaporeans finding success with their business abroad.

Homecoming

Starting a company in Singapore is a lot easier and speedier than in the US, even for a foreigner, Desmond admits. Aside from the visa troubles, the whole process in the States is a lot more complicated. It took several months for Desmond to incorporate Quikforce, while in Singapore he had businesses up and running in 24 hours. Still, the pros seem to outweigh the cons at the moment.



HARVARD INNOVATION LAB, WHERE QUIKFORCE WAS FOUNDED.
PHOTO CREDIT: HARVARD INNOVATION LAB

Desmond would consider bringing his latest company to Singapore at some point, though. “I’m talking to a few people back home and also in Hong Kong about how we could possibly either grow there or move,” he says.

For now he’s more interested in building a solid base for the company in the US.

The important thing, he points out, is that he’s invested in this company for the long haul. “I’ve had so much fun during the past year doing this. I can see myself in it for the next five to 10 years.”

Editing by Steven Millward and Kylee McIntyre

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