

# Chinese shopping websites go places

Cyber malls winning fans overseas for their bargain prices and wide range of items



Ho Ai Li  
China Correspondent  
in Beijing

Mr Ng Guo Hong, 24, had never heard of Taobao – China's biggest online market – until he went to Beijing on an internship last year. After a colleague told him about Taobao, the Singaporean undergraduate at the Nanyang Technological University was amazed at the cheap goods the site offers: A desktop fan for just \$10. A toaster oven for about \$20.

Though Mr Ng has since

returned to Singapore, he still buys merchandise such as clothes and bags from the website regularly.

Even without much marketing, Chinese shopping websites like Taobao are already winning fans in places like Singapore. Now they are aiming higher – to even take on global online retail giant Amazon.

"We're aiming to become like Amazon," Mr Shi Tao, vice-president of major Chinese cyber mall Jingdong, which launched an English-language website last October and delivers its goods to 36 countries

ese partner in September last year to tap the country's 31 million netizens.

Facing with intense competition at home, Chinese e-commerce firms are eyeing markets abroad, said Mr Fang Xingdong, who heads Internet business consultancy Chinaling.

Jingdong, for one, launched an English-language website last October and delivers its goods via partners such as DHL and UPS to 36 countries. It plans to have websites in French and Spanish later this year and build warehouses in selected markets to shorten delivery times.

So far, about seven in 10 of its overseas customers are based in the United States, followed by countries like Canada or Britain. Most of its Asia-based customers are from Singapore, Mr Shi said.

Jingdong is one of the many Chinese online websites that have been expanding their business abroad in recent months. Another is clothing retailer Vancl, which announced a tie-up with a Vietnam-

Amazon dream  
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Taobao, China's largest online shopping platform, recently linked up with Singapore's DBS Bank to allow customers to pay using their DBS and POSB bank cards.

Last year, it started accepting cards from Hong Kong and Taiwan, where it now has about 1.5 million users, Chinese media said.

It is not known how many Taobao shoppers are from Singapore, but demand is growing, going by rising orders from the Republic.

At least three major agents – Peek-a, Seshop and 65daigou – have sprung up in the last few years to help Singaporeans buy goods from Chinese shopping websites. All have upwards of 10,000 registered users and at least 30 full-time workers.

"The biggest selling point is that things on these sites are very, very cheap," said Mr Lai Xin, 28, a co-founder of Seshop. He says revenue has grown by 20 times since its start in 2011.

And, as Mr Ng said: "The best part is you can get the best price without the need to bargain."

Chinese websites also offer a wider range of items, said Mr He Jian, 32, one of the founders of 65daigou, which has just added an office in Guangzhou.

"They can buy things that are hard to find in Singapore," he said, for example, a greater range of hooks for shower curtains or ink stamps used in offices.

Overseas expansion adds to the allure of businesses like Jingdong to foreign investors, noted Mr Fang.

But for now, foreign sales make up just a tiny part of the revenues of these Chinese e-commerce players.

For Taobao, overseas users made up 5 per cent of its 400 million registered accounts as of last June.

It was recently taken off the United States government's blacklist of sites which host pirated content, which will help its expansion efforts, said the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Technology Review.

"There's scope overseas but Chinese firms would have to solve the issues of payment, logistics and brand promotion," said Mr Fang.

But Chinese cyber malls have to step out and look for new markets as growth will slow eventually, said Mr Shi.

"We can't always stay put in China," he said.

hoaili@sph.com.sg



A woman in Beijing shopping online at Taobao. The Chinese website is getting popular in Singapore and recently linked up with Singapore's DBS Bank to allow customers to pay using their DBS and POSB bank cards.

# China has turned me into an online shopping addict



Kian Beng  
China Bureau Chief  
in Beijing

Hello everyone, my name is Kian Beng and I'm an online shopping addict.

I didn't use to be this way. Apart from movie tickets, I never used to buy anything online.

When I shop, I prefer to see, feel or try things on, especially clothes and shoes or expensive items that could burn a hole in my wallet and heart if they turn out to be lemons. But in the seven months since I relocated to Beijing, I've bought more than 30 items via China's online shopping portals. Big, small, cheap, costly, daily essentials or pure whimsical wants – you name it, I've bought it.

A portable heater, a cooking steamer, a slow cooker, a laundry basket, a pair of sports sneakers, a rice container, a cooking board, four cooking pots, a tatami bed, a duvet and four pillows. Also, four cellphone covers, two cushions, a wall clock, moisturiser, two computer mouses and two mouse pads.

Recently I have been hunting online for winter socks.

Almost every night, as I click on my mouse and scrutinise each potential purchase on the computer screen, I begin to understand why China has become one of the world's fastest-growing e-commerce markets.

News reports say China has more than 200 million cyber-shoppers – the largest market globally. Internet sales of goods and services in China grew sixfold from 2008 to 2011 and are expected to go higher.

It's easy to see why. Online shopping in China is fun, cost-effective, more convenient and highly addictive.

My top sites are Jingdong (www.360buy.com) and Taobao (www.taobao.com). Both are mammoth marketplaces that sell almost everything anyone would need or want.

Jingdong caters mostly to shoppers in Beijing while Taobao reportedly has catered about 80 per cent of the online shopping sector.

China's online shopping sites are so well-organised and inter-linked that it is easy for a shopper to get carried away.

**Super-fast delivery**  
Buy most things on Jingdong before 11am and the items will arrive before 7pm that very day. Purchases made before 11pm are sent before 3pm the next day. It's almost-instant gratification for shoppers.

It is fast too. Buy most things on Jingdong before 11am and the items will arrive before 7pm that very day. Purchases made before 11pm are sent before 3pm the next day. It's almost-instant gratification for shoppers.

Online shopping is also cheaper, particularly on group-buying sites. I once eyed a pair of sneakers selling on Taobao at 20 per cent lower than in the store.

Also, for foreigners still unfamiliar with locations in Beijing, it makes more sense to buy online than risk getting lost, especially in the current bitter winter cold.

Almost all my purchases have also turned out fine so far – except for a clasp that came with a chip on its rim.

But there are risks involved with cyber-shopping in China. You must remember to destroy the receipts that come with each purchase. There have been news reports of cyber-shoppers falling prey to identity hunters who capitalise on the information printed on the receipts, such as the name and contact number of the buyer.

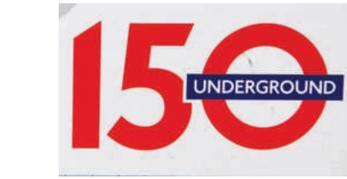
Also, it is important to stay disciplined and clear-minded while shopping online. One woman in Suzhou reportedly chopped off her thumb after a tiff with her husband last month over her e-shopping addiction.

Other than that, shopping online in China is largely safe and idiot-proof.

So, as China's online merchants seek to expand overseas to places such as Singapore, you too may end up like me.

Be warned.

kianbeng@sph.com.sg



# Life pumps on in London's arteries



Jonathan Eyal  
Europe Correspondent  
in London

It was not much of a train journey: a mere 18 minutes. It was not much of a tunnel either: The train effectively moved in a trench, which was covered from above by brick vaults. But the trip which a group of Londoners took on Jan 9, 1863 transformed the history of public transport. It was the first journey of what the Brits still call the Tube, the world's first underground system, which marked its 150th anniversary last week.

Far from being the altruistic work of Victorian engineers determined to decongest the British capital's clogged roads, the Tube was built entirely by venture capitalists in it for the profit, although few lived long enough to see it.

Furthermore, the initial aim of the network was not to alleviate transport difficulties but, rather, simply to feed passengers between London's main national railway stations which, because of legislation in force then, had to be built on the city's peripheries.

Finally, the Tube was not conceived for mass transit. Initially, tickets were priced at three, four and six pence per journey, depending on the class of travel, at a time when a loaf of bread cost a single penny, and six pence bought a hot meal plus a beer in an average pub. So, until the start of the 20th century,

the Tube was a luxury. Poorer Londoners continued to use trams and buses.

To this day, the network holds the dubious honour of being the most expensive underground in the world: A single ticket bought without various discounts will set you back a cool £4.50 (\$58.85).

Still, since Britain's capital was by far the world's biggest city at that time, there was plenty of business for everyone. Lord Palmerston, then the prime minister, declined an invitation to attend the opening with an ironic remark which only the British can deliver effortlessly. He noted that since he was already 79 years old, he preferred to "stay above ground for a few more years".

Nevertheless, 40,000 people bought tickets on the Tube's first day. By 1880, the network was accommodating an astonishing 115 million trips a year.

The Tube was not the most complicated urban transport solution the Brits considered. That distinction is probably held by a group of entrepreneurs who, in 1850, suggested a long iron-and-glass arcade resembling Singapore's Lau Pa Sat market which was supposed to accommodate both trains and shops and remain suspended on stilts all across London.

Nonetheless, the Underground's engineering was astounding. Builders had to dispel widespread fears that the tunnels would cave in under the weight of the buildings above.

And a solution had to be found for the smoke of the burning coal used by the initial train engines – that came with an ingenious technology which condensed the smoke through tanks of water. Each train engine cost the equivalent of about \$5 million in today's money and remained in use until the introduction of electric trains in the early 1900s.

In its 150 years of operation, no more than 20 people were killed in collisions and various other technical accidents.



Engineers had to dispel fears that the Tube's tunnels would cave in under the weight of buildings above. (Above) The Bakerloo Line train at the Piccadilly Circus station. (Right) A restored steam engine in Baker Street station during a test run on Dec 16 for the anniversary celebrations.

Of course, there were – and are – plenty of gripes. Overcrowding quickly became a problem, although the Circle Line alone operated 800 scheduled daily trains in 1884, a feat it cannot accomplish today. The platforms became unsuitable for newer train carriages, giving birth to the famous "Mind The Gap" warnings. And then, there are the inexplicable "signalling problems": the Tube is the only transport network in the world which makes announcements when "all services operate normally".

But unlike politicians in other countries, such as Singapore, who are expected to answer for alleged transport system failures, British leaders quickly perfected the art of absolving themselves of responsibility.



The London Underground with the Big Ben clock tower in the background. Each day, the world's first subway system carries three million commuters around the city.

ity for any Tube mishaps.

For over a century, the network has been run by a confusing web of private and public boards and officials, whose primary job is always to protect governments from any popular backlash about a transport system which decayed at a faster rate than the British empire itself.

But gripes aside, Londoners treat the Tube in the same affectionate way one would treat an elderly aunt: as someone who is a bit batty, a bit unstable, but always dependable.

One explanation for this is that the Tube was indulgent towards its users. Until the late 1970s, it was possible to smoke in its carriages. I still recall the bluish-green haze, the stench and the piles of discarded cigarette butts. Drinking alcohol was banned only a few years ago. And both pets and eating are still permitted; all the Tube asks is that the food should not be "smelly".

The Tube was also present at all of London's joyous and tragic occasions. Underground companies financed the building of housing estates outside the city centre. That increased the volume of commuters, but also allowed millions to find affordable homes. The Tube is still free to ride on important national holidays and on each New Year's Day. Furthermore, it was in the Underground that Londoners sought safety during the aerial bombardments of World War II.

And although the July 7, 2005, terrorist attacks, which killed 52 civilians and injured 700 more, remain fresh in Londoners' memory, the fact is that the Tube was already targeted by terrorists soon after it was created.

Incidentally, the first person to be killed in the Underground from a terrorist attack was a Jewish immigrant from Russia, blown up by Irish nationalists on Oct 5, 1883, an early reminder of the fact that London was always a multi-ethnic place.

But after every terrorist attack or enemy bombing, the entire system bounced back in less than 12 hours. The capital's blood arteries never stopped.

It is now impossible to envisage London without the Tube. Its famous round circle symbol and typeface – both historic pioneers in corporate branding – provide an instantly recognisable identity, one which is lacking in other underground systems.

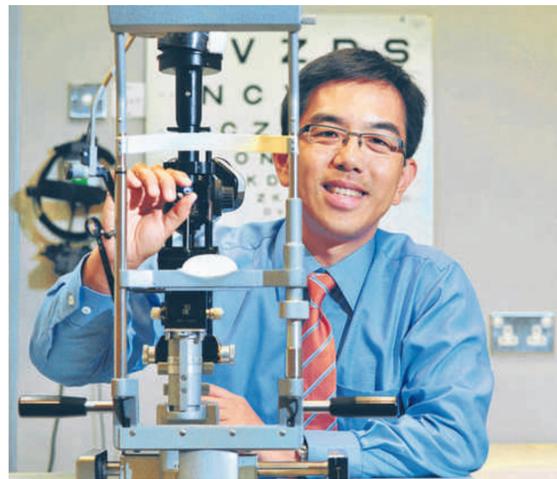
And the ingenuity of its network map, which is neither to scale nor an accurate description of London's geography but works because it is so simple to understand, has literally re-invented the British capital.

The only mental image which Londoners have of their city is that provided by the Tube map, and subsequently copied in its layout by every single underground network in the world apart, of course, from that of Paris, which clung to its spidery, incomprehensible maps.

So, as the often dirty trains continue to carry three million commuters each day, the memory of the generations of engineers and operators who made it all possible is being honoured.

A flower bouquet left at Paddington Station where it all began 150 years ago last week carried a simple message: "Thank you."

jonathan.eyal@gmail.com



Prof Wong, who heads the Singapore Eye Research Institute, has had remarkable success in translating discoveries into treatments for patients, despite relatively little guaranteed funding.

# Wanted: More doctor-researchers



Chang Ai-Lien  
Senior Correspondent

Professor Wong Tien Yin helped make the Singapore Eye Research Institute (SERI) which heads one of the world's finest in its field.

Its doctor-researchers have been lauded for turning numerous research discoveries into improved treatments for patients over the years.

As the new group director for research at SingHealth, Prof Wong now wants to achieve the same with research in a wide range of areas, from immunology to cancer and Alzheimer's disease.

"It's an advantage working with both SingHealth and the National University Health System (NUHS) simultaneously and seamlessly, because it allows me to watch developments and see what changes are needed," he said.

To raise biomedical research to the next level, his first priority is to encourage more doctors to do research. This will enable Singapore to build up a national pipeline of clinician-scientists, a group that is rare the world over because of the effort it takes to juggle treating patients with doing research.

"The clinician-scientist perspective is important because these people are the bridge between basic science and the clinical community," said Prof Wong, who is the new chairman of the clinician-scientist award programme under the National Medical Research Council.

Without clinician-scientists, laboratory discoveries often languish in what has been dubbed "the valley of death" because they do not get transformed into better treatments for patients.

The aim is to have 160 clinician-scientists in Singapore by 2015, double the number in 2010. He acknowledges that getting there will be a struggle.

"Although there are over 10,000 doctors in Singapore, a

very, very small percentage is willing to do research because it calls for almost double the training and the workload. You almost need to hand-pick the right people and set them on a well-planned path," he said.

About 40 potential candidates have been identified from hospitals – ranging from junior doctors to mid-career professionals interested in getting their doctorates – to groom them for this track. They will later spend 50 to 70 per cent of their time on research.

"We have to be very careful, to make sure the experience is very satisfying, and that there's good infrastructure, support and mentoring so that they will want to make it a career," Prof Wong said.

In recent years, there has been a range of early career grants that support young clinicians who want to start a research project, providing them time for research, and allowing them to experience life as both clinician-scientists.

These grants typically require a senior mentor to supervise and guide the junior doctor, while the academic medical centres provide lab space and other resource and infrastructure support to ensure their experience is satisfying.

A national chapter of clinician-scientists will also be set up under the Academy of Medicine, alongside the four existing chapters for emergency physicians, pathologists; public health and occupational physicians; and psychiatrists.

"This will be a form of national recognition of their status, equivalent to a medical specialty," he explained.

Another 400 or so doctors who spend most of their time treating patients but also do some research will be critical in recruiting patients and conducting drug trials.

Prof Wong speaks from experience. The 44-year-old is among the world's most prolific researchers in his field, with more than 600 research papers under his belt and awards not only in ophthalmology, but also in cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Seri, the institute he runs, has had remarkable success in translating discoveries into treatments for patients, despite relatively little guaranteed funding.

With just \$3 million in annual core funding from the Ministry of Health, its staff of close to 200 get most of their \$15 million yearly budget by applying for competitive grants and on commercial trials.

They will work with researchers from other groups including those under the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A\*Star).

"These are areas of strength where we can compete internationally, but it's the first time we're putting everyone together to do so," he said.

Rare vocation

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Prof Wong Tien Yin, new group director for research at SingHealth

"We have been grooming clinician-scientists for a long time," he said.

And the reason Seri has been so successful is that it has laboratories in both SingHealth and NUIHS campuses, and has a national perspective."

Both groups have also secured more than \$30 million in funding to jumpstart six areas of research in which Singapore is already strong – cancer; neuroscience; cardiometabolic diseases; eye research; infection, immunology and infectious disease; and health service research.

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"These are areas of strength where we can compete internationally, but it's the first time we're putting everyone together to do so," he said.

ailien@sph.com.sg

## RESEARCH CHIEF WITH THE HEALING TOUCH

Professor Wong Tien Yin, 44, is executive director of the Singapore Eye Research Institute, group director for research at SingHealth, professor and head of the Department of Ophthalmology at the National University of Singapore, and chief of ophthalmology at the National University Hospital.

One of Singapore's pioneering clinician-scientists, he balances treating patients and carrying out research on eye diseases.

He directs a large multi-disciplinary research

programme and clinical trials. He has published more than 600 research papers in top international journals.

He is also a co-inventor of 10 patents, and the principal investigator of research projects that have attracted more than US\$50 million (\$561 million) in grant funding from bodies here and overseas.

Among his numerous awards is Singapore's premier scientific honour, the President's Science Award, which he received in 2010.