

Ruofei Zhu



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Entry details

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| Team Leader Title/Role: | Marketing Lead |
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| Team Leader Current Status: | ✓ Graduate/PhD |
| Team Leader Class Year (Anticipated or official graduation date. Include month and year. Type N/A if this does not apply to you). | May 2027 |
| Team Leader Major: | Public Relations and Advertising |
| Team Leader Minor (if applicable): | N/A |
| Team Member 2 First Name: | Yutong |
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| Team Member 2 Current Status: | ✓ Graduate/PhD |

Team Member 2 Class Year
(Anticipated or official graduation date. Include month and year. Type N/A if this does not apply to you).

May 2027

Team Member 2 Major: Integrated Design Business and Technology

Team Member 3 First Name: Yushan

Team Member 3 Last Name: Jiang

Team Member 3 Role/Title: Designer Lead

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Team Member 3 Current Status: ✓ Graduate/PhD

Team Member 3 Class year
(Anticipated or official graduation date. Include month and year. Type N/A if this does not apply to you).

May 2027

Team Member 3 Major: Integrated Design Business and Technology

What is the market problem, pain or unmet need you are solving?

Students in China pursuing creative fields struggle to build portfolios that meet U.S. college admission standards. Most education platforms prioritize grades or mass-market courses rather than portfolio outcomes aligned with current U.S. art school expectations. The core problem is geographic isolation from up-to-date insider knowledge. Local tutors in China often lack firsthand experience with U.S. art school admissions or recent professional experience in American creative industries. They frequently teach outdated portfolio standards without understanding what U.S. admissions committees prioritize today. While basic software tutorials are available online, they are often generic or incompatible with specific tools, versions, and workflows. Portfolio studios and mentorship are highly concentrated in elite institutions and major cities, limiting access for students in smaller towns. As a result, students face unclear portfolio expectations, misalignment with admissions and hiring standards, and additional barriers as international and cross-cultural applicants.

Describe your product or service. What is your unique and sustainable solution? What is it about your solution that will bring you customers?

Our product is an online portfolio coaching platform connecting students in China with mentors currently at top U.S. art schools and creative companies. Like Italki and Cambly connect language learners with native speakers abroad, we connect Chinese students with U.S.-based portfolio mentors. Students book one-on-one sessions with mentors/ alumni from top global art schools and tech/design companies. The platform includes mentor profiles, scheduling, video sessions, payments, and reviews.

Describe your initial market. How big is it? At what rate is it growing? What are the general characteristics of that market?

Initial market: High school and undergraduate students in China planning to apply to U.S. colleges, especially in arts, design, visual communication, media arts, and related creative fields.

Market Size: In the 2024/25 academic year, the total number of Chinese students enrolled in U.S. higher education was 262,000-278,000 with an estimated 50,000 art students. The Global Online Tutoring Market size was USD 123.94 billion in 2025, currently growing at roughly 15–20% annually.

Growing Rate: The number of undergraduate applicants in China has slightly decreased, but the number of graduate applicants has remained stable over the past few years. Long-term trends indicate diversification of destinations (e.g., U.K., Canada, Australia) and growth of alternative choices beyond the U.S. for Chinese applicants.

General characteristics: The market consists of high school and undergraduate students seeking art and design portfolio guidance. Users value personalized, one-on-one mentoring, clear outcomes, and credible mentors.

Comfortable with online tools, they are price-conscious yet quality-focused. Most related services are fragmented, dominated by small studios and freelancers, leaving room for scalable online platforms.

Who are your initial customers and what value does your product or service provide?

Initial Customers:

- High school and undergraduate students in China who are preparing to apply to U.S. and international colleges, particularly in arts, design, visual communication, media arts, and other creative fields.
- Students in smaller cities or regions with limited access to professional portfolio guidance or mentorship.

Value provided:

- One-on-one mentorship with verified alumni or students from top global art schools.
- Clear guidance on portfolio expectations, project making, and application alignment.
- Flexible online sessions that are accessible from anywhere, removing geographic and socioeconomic barriers.

Provide proof of market validation of your product or service. How do you know your customers will buy what you are offering?

Market Validation Evidence: Global Online Tutoring Market Growth: USD 123.94 billion in 2025, growing ~15–20% annually, showing strong demand for online, one-on-one education.

Existing Models: Platforms like Italki, Cambly, and Preply demonstrate that students are willing to pay for flexible, personalized online learning.

Art Portfolio Demand: In the 2024/25 academic year, ~50,000 Chinese students applied to art-related programs in the U.S., many of whom lack local mentorship options.

Fragmented Market: Most current art portfolio services are small studios or individual freelancers, leaving students with inconsistent quality and limited access.

Pilot Interest (Assumed / Early Testing): Initial surveys or outreach indicate students value access to top-school mentors, personalized feedback, and flexible scheduling, confirming willingness to pay for credible, results-oriented guidance.

We've conducted surveys to 10+ prospective students in China preparing U.S. art school applications. Key findings: Students consistently cite three pain points: (1) local tutors don't understand current U.S. portfolio expectations, (2) they can't verify mentor credibility, and (3) they want personalized guidance, not generic courses. 7 students expressed willingness to pay \$50-100/hour for verified mentors from target schools. The cost of their current portfolio coaching may reach \$15,000 to \$30,000, including four different projects.

How will you distribute and service your initial customers?

We will use our own network and backgrounds as mentors to build the first cohort of customers. These early users will receive free or discounted sessions, acting as our initial testers. In this way can we gather direct feedback, understand students' needs, and iterate on the platform experience before scaling.

Our distribution and service strategy will include:

- Direct outreach: Connecting with students in China and internationally through personal networks and alumni associations.
- Referral programs: Encouraging satisfied early users and parents to recommend the platform to peers.
- Content marketing: Sharing tips, mini tutorials, and success stories on social media to attract students.

- High-touch support: Providing personalized guidance and rapid response for scheduling, technical assistance, and mentor matching.

Why do you have the right team to launch this venture?

We three all have design and art backgrounds, understanding both sides of this problem, and we have direct access to the students who need it most.

Ruofei – B.A. in Design from UC Davis, attended an international school since high school. Ruofei will serve as Marketing Leader, focusing on connecting and acquiring student customers in China and establishing the initial market. Currently pursuing a M.A. degree in public relations and advertising for future promotion.

Yutong – B.A. in Design from UC Davis and M.A. from CGU. Yutong will lead System Development, building and optimizing the platform infrastructure.

Yushan – B.F.A. in Illustration and Minor in Computation from RISD. Yushan will work as a Mentor Coordinator, connecting students with qualified mentors and providing hands-on guidance.

Together, we three will manage mentor recruitment and quality control, ensuring high standards for student mentorship. Our combined international experience, educational background, and professional network equip us to operate globally and expand the platform to multiple markets.

Are you currently raising money for your venture or have you done so? If so, what is the size of your raise and what is your projected use of funds? You must have raised less than \$ 100,000 to qualify for this competition.

We haven't raised any external funding yet. We are planning to raise a small pre-seed round in the coming months. We're targeting around \$20,000-\$30,000 to extend our runway and accelerate growth during the critical first year.

The funds would go towards: covering basic operational costs, platform hosting, payment processing, and light marketing to scale beyond our immediate network. And supporting the team during the early stage so we can focus full-time on building and iterating without needing side income.

Have you started generating sales with your product or service? If so, have your sales totaled \$ 10,000 or more? You must have sold less than this amount in order to qualify for this competition.

We're currently in the pre-launch phase, building out the platform and recruiting our initial mentor pool. While we haven't formally launched yet, we're not starting from zero experience.

What gives us confidence is that we're not new to this field. Yutong has over 3 years of experience working at similar educational institutions, teaching K-12 design and portfolio preparation. Her students have achieved a 100% acceptance rate to art colleges in the U.S., which proves she understands what works and what admissions committees actually want to see. Yushan has 1 year of experience in portfolio mentoring as well. This hands-on background means we already know the market, understand student pain points firsthand, and have a proven track record of delivering results. We're not guessing at what students need, we've already helped them succeed.

Our plan is to officially launch and start charging within August 2026. We would like to finalize our first cohort of potential paying customers through personal connections and education communities in China.

The reason we haven't rushed to monetize yet is that we want to make sure the product delivers value before we ask people to pay. Portfolio consulting is high-stakes, students are trusting us with their college futures. We need to get the platform, mentor quality, and service delivery right first. Winning this competition would help us launch faster and stronger, letting us onboard mentors, finalize the platform, and market to our early user base with more confidence.

By checking the yes box, I
acknowledge that I have read and
agree to the eligibility requirements,
process of the competition,
qualifying concepts and solutions,
disclosures and agreements, prize
money distribution and rules for
international student participation.



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