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Australia's first crypto exchange is not a typical success story



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In 2013 when Australian entrepreneur Asher Tan started cryptocurrency exchange CoinJar, more than half of his job was simply explaining to users what Bitcoin was. Almost a decade later, that conversation happens much less often.

“The narrative has moved on from that,” Tan tells *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. “The conversation right now isn’t ‘what is Bitcoin’, it’s [‘should Tesla sell its Bitcoin’](#).”

“That would have been a ridiculous headline ten years ago - what’s a car company doing with Bitcoin anyway? It’s all progressed so far.”



CoinJar chief executive Asher Tan has been around since the early days of Bitcoin.

In the years since Tan started CoinJar, the crypto industry has drastically changed, morphing from a niche movement for tech-savvy investors to a multi-trillion dollar asset class capturing the interest of retail and institutional investors alike.

Tan, along with his co-founder Ryan Zhou, holds the accolade of being one of the earliest Australian crypto exchanges to launch, with Tan joking there had been high expectations for CoinJar given the company was funded in the same round as a “bunch of unicorns”.

“We were one of the early companies backed by Blackbird Ventures. We were in fund one, which is the same fund as Canva, SafetyCulture, and Culture Amp,” he says. “They’re a bunch of unicorns - is that what’s expected of us?”

Expected or not, CoinJar has eschewed much of the traditional VC-fuelled startup growth trajectory, not raising any further capital after its seed round and instead opting to grow the business organically. Today the exchange has around half a million users and oversees around \$1 billion in funds.

The more measured approach has served the business well through the dips and troughs of the notoriously volatile crypto market, Tan believes, especially recently with the sharp decline in crypto assets prompting the closure of international exchanges Celsius and Voyager.

“In bull markets, you look around you and think ‘how are these guys getting so big, so fast?’ And it’s tempting to do everything to try and catch up, or instead, you can just run it yourself how you think is best,” he says.

“We might not be the template of what might look like a typical success story - we’re not making headlines with massive fundraises or anything - but CoinJar’s always been the sort of company that figures out its own path.”



Crypto markets have been in a funk since November, with some valuations slashed by as much as 60 per cent. GETTY

This ideology also extends to Tan's own engagement in the crypto industry, which is often dominated by loud voices and brash 'maximalist' personalities who are quick to denounce projects and companies that don't fit within their existing ethos.

"Every market cycle you see different heroes and villains, but you don't have to be one - you can just be yourself," he says. "Everyone's always trying to shout over everyone else, but you don't really need to participate in that."

Bull market pressure

Alongside Independent Reserve, BTCMarkets and Swyftx, CoinJar is part of just a handful of major Australian exchanges, which for many years operated with minimal international competition - a position that is slowly starting to change as more players start to eye off the unusually crypto-savvy Australian market.

When you're in that really busy bull market, you basically don't have any time to do anything except just trying to make sure your business is running. Everyone's just struggling to stay afloat.

CoinJar CEO Asher Tan

However, being partially in the UK means CoinJar has the advantage of being already regulated under the country's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and is one of the few crypto-asset exchanges to gain that regulation. Australian exchanges are, in essence, unregulated, as the industry is still waiting on last year's proposed reforms to be legislated.

Tan says that he hopes any regulation implemented in Australia is effective in its goal of protecting consumers but says lawmakers should be cognisant of the nuance of legislating the complicated crypto space to not go too far with their regulation.

Currently, the broader crypto market has fallen by over 60 per cent since hitting an all-time high of over \$4 trillion last November. Though this is far from Tan's first bear market, he remarks the crash has been exacerbated by the unusually long and frothy bull market which preceded it.

"It went for 18 months and was wild and whacky, take the 10 times increase in Dogecoin for example," he says. "But when you're in that really busy bull market, you basically don't have any time to do anything except just trying to make sure your business is running. Everyone's just struggling to stay afloat."

It's for this reason Tan actually welcomes the bear market for CoinJar, saying it will cut out a lot of the "noise" in the industry and allow the business to focus on building out its service, so the company can continue to ride out whatever the crypto market throws at it in the future.

"It's been a long time. When we started, Ryan and I were both still in our twenties," he says. "I'm just happy I don't have to explain to you what Bitcoin is."

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