**A Conversation on Tech Careers Across Continents**

When I sat down with a seasoned Principal Product Manager from ByteDance, I knew I was in for a story as winding as the tech industry itself. Born in the bustling metropolis of Shanghai, he spent his early years completing high school in China. Then, like many ambitious students, he took a leap, heading to the U.S. to begin his undergraduate studies in business at Kent State University. But that wasn't quite the right fit, so he transferred to Ohio State University to dive into mechanical engineering—a decision that would change his trajectory yet again.

His academic journey didn't stop there. After completing his degree, he set his sights on Stanford for a master's in mechanical engineering. "The experience at Stanford was incredible," he said, "but after a Tesla internship and all the tech scene exposure, I decided to return to China. I had strong personal reasons, like my family and girlfriend back home, and the Chinese economy was booming." ByteDance wasn't on his radar yet, but when Alibaba presented an enticing offer, he couldn't resist. It was a chance to join a giant during a pivotal moment, even though he admits the timing was tricky—right as the internet boom began to level off. "It's funny," he reflected, "no one can predict the future precisely."

He talked about his transition back to China and the cultural contrast between work environments in the U.S. and China. "In the U.S., working feels like being part of a club where people share the same interests," he noted. "But in China, it's more structured—like a student union with a defined hierarchy. Each has its perks, but one thing remains true: motivation and energy vary more between teams than companies. Finding the right team is key."

When I asked about his role as a tech lead, he didn't hesitate. He explained that while innovation is the heartbeat of the tech world, it's often a marathon rather than a sprint in big companies. "Sometimes you have a groundbreaking idea that could change things, but to see it through takes a year—or more. For a tech lead, most of your time is spent maintaining the core business, which is stable and profitable. So while you're doing meaningful work, it might not shake the company's foundation as much as you'd hope."

His thoughts on education were equally grounded. "A master's degree is a great entry point, but a Ph.D. might not always be worth it unless you're passionate about research. Real-world experience teaches you the most, so your first job is critical. It'll give you practical insight. Whether it's selling coffee or designing a product, anything real-world helps you understand what people actually need."

One part of our conversation that struck me was his advice on side projects. "Do meaningful projects that solve real problems, not just to pad a resume." In a world where the race for a strong resume often trumps actual impact, his words resonated.

He also spoke about the different approaches to interviews in the U.S. and China. "In the U.S., interviews are more about understanding how you approach problems and think critically. Interviewers care about your reasoning behind design choices rather than technical details." In China, however, he noted that the style varies widely and relies more on your resume to guide the conversation. "Think of your resume as a kind of roadmap for the interviewer," he explained.

When choosing team members, he values practical skills over academic ones. "You need a strong grasp of technology and the ability to translate business needs into data-driven solutions. But domain knowledge is crucial too, especially here. Companies want someone who can jump in right away and make an impact."

Before we wrapped up, I asked him for any final insights. His response was deeply reflective: "Science is how we understand the world, but engineering is how we make ideas real. Wherever you work, in the U.S. or China, you can find happiness in what you do—whether that's through salary, a network of friends, or other sources of fulfillment. Don't make financial freedom your only goal; it's boring. Instead, enjoy the journey."

This conversation left me with a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities in both Chinese and U.S. tech scenes. His pragmatic yet optimistic approach serves as a reminder that, while we can't predict the future, we can shape it by staying grounded, curious, and open to whatever comes next.