**“Conversations On Turning 20”: Ethan Lin on Para-Hawking, Turning Points and Ghosts**

When you get to the ripe young age of 20, you’re bound to collect lots of stories – not only about the past but lessons for the future.

As WiT marks its 20th year in 2025, we turn the spotlight on our community, our tribe pioneers and leaders, to tell their stories and share their views on the evolution of online travel and technology.

We ask them to look back on the past and their early days, reflect on the present and why this moment is pivotal for online travel and get them to imagine the future, the next 20.

This special WiT Studio series, “Conversations On Turning 20”, is the collective story of WiT.

As a Chinese saying goes, 以古为鉴，可以知兴替

“By using history as a mirror, one can understand the rise and fall of things.”

**Episode 2: Ethan Lin, CEO & Co-founder, Klook**

Ethan Lin was a newbie to travel when he and co-founder Eric Gnock Fah stepped onto the WiT Japan stage in Tokyo in 2015 to pitch their idea of a tours and activities marketplace for travellers of their generation.

Fast forward 10 years, and Klook has grown into a travel brand that’s looked up to and admired by a growing legion of Asian entrepreneurs for their vision and purpose, their ability to execute and scale across multi-markets in the region, their growth and their strategic approach to fund raising.

And after a decade of building its foundation in Asia, they are ready to take their brand beyond Asia, and follow the Asian traveller.

But it’s not been without its challenges and making rookie mistakes.

Here’s Ethan’s take on the story of online travel, tales being told for the first time here.

**FIRST CAUTIONARY TALE FOR WANNA-BE FOUNDERS**

06:38.34

Ethan L

Yes, sadly, I'm already considered a voucher myself in the travel tech space. And I was fortunate enough to be invited to also have the chance to, I want to say give back, but also to share my experience with the next gen of the of the of the travel tech.

06:58.23

Ethan L

How many of you were there? entrepreneurial, right. And also, the you know, seeing, you know, what myself was seeing now in the Gen Zs, right, that that was a very, very interesting and also another rewarding feelings.

07:15.02

Ethan L

And a lot of questions I, you know, that they ask, right, are great. That

07:23.56

Ethan L

Those questions is what really get people to start thinking more and more. it it It doesn't need to be a right or wrong question because some questions, it just maybe people haven't went through.

07:35.04

Ethan L

So a typical question i have is that in the wait, a mentoring session, someone will share a business idea. But now after doing it for 10 years, my first question will pop up and challenging the person is, do you think it's scalable?

07:52.69

Ethan L

right, what it takes to scale, right, what is a fundamental ah commonality in the business model that it can scale to the size that you are looking at. ah That's always something that need to bear in mind, because often we look at a one um pinpoint that a consumer facing.

08:11.36

Ethan L

but there's so many pain points of consumer vision. Some of this pain point has not been solved. Is that because it it's just an individual need or is that really a common issues that can be solved? So really distinguish between the two, then that give you a more visible business that you can tackle.

08:30.99

Ethan L

So I think that's something where I was interacting with that also resonate with how my early stage that we also did something that was not so scalable. um It was doing really the ah ah very, very unique and niche activities.

08:48.60

Ethan L

That is so cool. like I want to do myself. So you know one of the first activities we onboarded was a parallel hiking. It's a parallel gliding experience in Nepal.

09:00.64

Ethan L

that um ah the the one who takes you to parallel gliding also have a hawk. Like, you know, it's landing here, it goes out and coming back.

09:12.14

Ethan L

So you call parallel hawking, right? It's only three people can do it in a war in Nepal. So we onboard it. It looks amazing, right? But, you know, with millions, millions of views because it was such a social media buzz.

09:26.74

Ethan L

And there's only three bookings. ever since we had the activities, right? So what you think is a pinpoint, something of a personal interest, when you really put into the market, is it really scalable? Is it surprise scalable?

**THE TURNING POINTS**

11:06.04

Ethan L

I want say there's one big turning point, because I think the last 10 years, there are definitely three turning points. And one turning point is very happening at this moment.

11:16.67

Ethan L

so So actually, let me just quickly walk through the 10 years of the three turning points that I personally think that has already ah shaped how the consumer travel and what they use and the sound that is happening but yet to see the result.

11:34.03

Ethan L

So the first turning point was going mobile. ah the entire destination services of what accelerated growth was because of mobile. Because people are more spontaneous, the majority of the booking happens within a destination.

11:48.54

Ethan L

but It's very different from flight and hotel that you need to book several weeks ahead before you even fly out to another city. right The entire mobile is really give that a spontaneous instant on-the-go experience to the consumers.

12:03.17

Ethan L

So that is one of the first times ah a turning point for the entire travel sector is enhanced more ah possibility. ah Even a red share, payment, and all of this was happening because of the entire mobile ecosystem.

12:19.67

Ethan L

The second turning point is the rise of you know social media and content. um If you look at it 10 years ago, people who you know buy a lonely planning book and carry with them,

12:31.53

Ethan L

and travel. And five, six years ago, you searched through Google, ah do some research. And now you actually get inspiration, right? 60, 70% of the ah trip handings or idea were inspired through, you know, the lack of T-Talk, Instagram, YouTube, right? book in China, I mean, for for the millennial and Gen Zs.

12:54.40

Ethan L

So the way of how information has been obtained and inspired people what to do has also changed in the last five years. So that's the second turning point. And the third one is ah the AI adoption, which is largely than changing how um the localization, localation does service interaction with the consumer, the operational amount of the work in the travel space will be, I can't find the right way to put it, but it will be revolutionized through

13:28.34

Ethan L

the easy use of the AI. And I think that is happening at this very moment than that we ah while we are speaking. So if you ask me, I think these three are the really something I i see that changed the ah landscape of the travel space.

**THE NEW GENERATION TRAVELLER**

13:46.41

Ethan L

And then on the other end, the consumer behavior, other than this kind of technology changes, are also changing. That is basically the new generation are travel very different from our parents.

14:00.25

Ethan L

ah If you look at the previous generations, people still prefer to join a group tour. and during a group tour and areas have been taken care of. But in the last 10 years, because of all of this technology advancement, ah the growth of the AFIT, the independent travelers has accelerated.

14:20.77

Ethan L

If you're asking a Gen Z or millennial, have they ever joined a tour group for five days? Right, very like the likely answer is, huh, what is that? have not thought about it.

14:33.32

Ethan L

Right. So I think that's also changing because of all other, you know, technology advancement in the last 10 years.

**THE AGE OF SPECIALISATION**

15:20.32

Ethan L

Be more of a specialist rather than a journalist. Okay, I'll come back to to that in a bit. now Owning the content rather than bypassing information.

15:36.46

Ethan L

Because the things that are much more transparent you're and you're cutting so much of the middleman. So be especially ready and generous. What that means is, you know, traditionally you will have the travel agencies and all the older players that want to do everything.

15:52.55

Ethan L

But once you do everything, you do that one thing in one market. But once, because the mobile, or because of the social content, because of the ah the information flow for Gen Z, things are more integrated global, even through, you know, different markets have different culture, but people using the same thing, right? So hence, be a specialist in a certain field, you are actually able to scale so much wider in the region and globally, right? Versus do you need to compete in every single field, but in one single country?

16:27.19

Ethan L

Right? So BA Specialties actually bring you so much farther because the world is at at your fingertip. Versus you need to learn every single business model and compete with every single person, but in a single market.

**OWN THE CONTENT**

16:38.30

Ethan L

They all get crashed down. Right? The second is what I mean on the content. I don't mean on the social content means you develop like the each of the operator, the hotels, airlines, each one developed the services.

16:54.19

Ethan L

And if that services you working very closely with a platform and also to your direct consumers, you really learn how to pivoting the services. And then you have the best content to offer to the consumers.

17:08.52

Ethan L

Instead of you buy content from others and try to redistribute to other players. right Traditionally, there's a lot of models that you're buying from others and you sell to others because there's a lot of information mismatch.

17:23.92

Ethan L

but ah but But a lot of that players have been exiting the business you know because the content owner, the one actually providing the services and the direct-to-consumer platforms has become more and more closer.

17:39.33

Ethan L

right so But only that content is what really making the business long-term sustainable. right Because that's what you have, rather than reselling of other people's services.

17:50.47

Ethan L

So i think this too is what we see as a transformation in what business has been longstanding, much longer, versus that is a short-term business opportunities only.

**HOW KLOOK SPECIALISES AND CREATES NETWORK EFFECT**

19:58.96

Ethan L

Yeah. So CROOP is a specialist in a way that we are the leading president in experiences, especially in APAC. So instead of doing every single thing in a single market, we really create a network effect to bridge all the market and all the consumers to book all those amazing ah experiences in each of the destinations.

20:17.91

Ethan L

So we really specialize in going down very deep in each of the subcategories and the experiences. like you know a better spot reservation, you can get a ski lift ticket, and you can get a coach or coach for ah for your first time skiing, you can buy a attraction ticket. so So basically very specialized in the destination services.

20:40.41

Ethan L

And then we you know expand in the region and the global. So that's why you know we start we are the specialist in the category that we really able to own and go in region and global.

20:53.67

Ethan L

Internet content. So that's a bit different because I think we are a platform. But platform opportunities are happening um in entire tech space. right you For a platform business, you only have space for the top three, maximum top five, if the market is big enough.

21:14.28

Ethan L

right So then you need to create a synergy impact that you don't need to own the content. Then you're working with all the content partners. So we were fortunate enough in the last 10 years to grow into a branded platform that consumer will come and looking for all experiences.

21:30.36

Ethan L

So head on the content part, we don't own the content and the services, but we work in the open ecosystem with all the partners that offer the content. So, so on a second point is, is is a very different timing, right? 10 years ago that you asked me that I will say, yeah, there there was opportunities for experience platform, because the market size is big, right? And then all the right components has kicked in into accelerating the market, then that time, right? It's just, it is a sort of a um a winner takes all type of market if you're doing a platform business.

22:08.42

Ethan L

But I think that opportunity has bypassed it. Similarly, when you look at Grab, Sharpie, it's very difficult to create a network scale of where Sharpie and Grab is already at.

22:21.83

Ethan L

At the current stage, name is about only the content. but If you are operator for running the best services for the airport transfer, Right. And you're able to optimize in the operation with your drivers, with your services, and you'll get the most of the bookings and the best review and the best services you to the consumers.

22:40.92

Ethan L

ah So now the opportunity becomes really the only content and then you have so many platform and your own direct that i want to work with you as well.

**WILL KLOOK EVER OWN CONTENT?**

22:59.73

Ethan L

um I still don't see that. I think only content to me is back to what I fundamentally believe that travel is an ecosystem. Because no matter what content you own, you cannot own that much.

23:12.86

Ethan L

What we own is a brand recall for the consumers when they're looking for experiences. They're coming to us. So that gives the incremental demand for any partners that we are working with.

23:24.58

Ethan L

So instead of owning a content directly, I think what our job is, right, providing the best services to the consumer, have the most and most easy to use platform and can continue, you know, invest in our brand of recall for experiences and then empower the ecosystem to create even more content.

23:45.43

Ethan L

So our owning of the content come from our influence and value bring to our content partners and also coming from, you know, other means that we supporting the ecosystem to grow faster from, you know, co-marketing from investment, from different, um, uh, um, business corporation that able to have the best content to grow even faster.

**DIGITISATION: IS IT HAPPENING FAST ENOUGH?**

25:24.38

Ethan L

First, with a lot of open source of the LLM model, I think AI actually equalized the field for larger and smaller companies because it's what you do right.

25:40.50

Ethan L

Reader name, you know, how much resource you put to build a model because every models are there available. However, but data does matters. So the more data and more ah consumer behavior that you're really understanding, you can make the model more suitable to the consumers.

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Ethan L

So hence the investment is not high, but data is ah the field and then it's really depending how you ah do the application of the AI in the travel space.

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Ethan L

lot ah Everyone should embrace. um It doesn't mean every company will need to build something. that is AI.

26:41.06

Ethan L

But people should should increase because it goes into the day-to-day operation for every single day. So for example, we are working with the um we we we are working with a feature that compels different activities, different tools, because as you know, right there's so many tools that offer.

26:58.77

Ethan L

Sometimes it's very difficult for the consumer you ah to to to to to choose the most suitable one for them. And as they get used to for all other AI applications, no one wants to read so much content.

27:12.89

Ethan L

People want just have a conversation and know what I want. Just like ah you talking to a concierge who knows me, who recommended me the best tool that should have all for my own need. So that's kind where we are building. So to embrace it, right?

27:24.47

Ethan L

the content that will the written content for each of the ah tools right then we're working with the tool operators some of them we embrace actually giving more dimensions of the tools that will help them to better match with the consumer need versus the more less embraced one we'll just throw all the information just just put information put the basic information and hoping that the consumer will somehow understand it but You will totally see the two different types.

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Ethan L

ah But the solution is there, the tools are there. So at end the day is who does the basic operation better? And AI actually helps to summarize, to have a beautiful language, to interact with consumers in a much more efficient way.

But to to be able to provide the base and accurate information, and that's something the sector need to work on together.

**HOW ABOUT A KLOOK AGENT? WILL IT HAVE THE CUSTOMER’S BACK?**

29:06.43

Ethan L

ah For the first, how is 100% you from consumer lens to select, right, any fever, any partners? I think right now it's almost at 100% because the setup of the company, the platform operational team will always be separate out. It's an independent team from the merchant partnership, the business development.

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Ethan L

So their lens is basically... um They don't know any of the partners. They don't understand who is better, who is good. Their way is basically how it presented to the consumers and consumers can make the best decisions.

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Ethan L

So that means if the review is better, right, if the price is matching with the customer consumer demand, if the inventory availability is there, it will naturally have a high exposures and higher ranking to consumers.

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Ethan L

Right. ah Like, for example, very another example, right? They may be, you know, like, like a for certain tools that it doesn't have availability half time of the week.

30:08.35

Ethan L

So ah like a lot time when consumer book, they cannot really finding a more suitable time. So the conversion is lower, and it will naturally depart highest in the ranking and in order search journey and ah content journey with the consumers, right? so So that's always building around the consumer.

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Ethan L

right And then you know it will result in a lot of the matrix. I mean, it's hard for me to share the the exact equation there. It's a very comprehensive equation built by the system with the recommendation algorithm.

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Ethan L

ah But as long as it's in the best interest of the consumer, it will get a better exposure and better ranking. So that's already happened.

DEEPSEEK AND THE AI RACE

31:26.52

Ethan L

yeah It's definitely a race, right? And if you look at entire China tech stock has been ongoing re-evaluation. And Deepsea was of the trigger points that people notice is is not far away, if not very similar.

31:45.15

Ethan L

to where the US is at. right And my personal belief, well, it's less, is's is is is ah it's a lot of ah AI and the data sciences I met in the last one to two years.

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Ethan L

um What they share that you will always have few large models. um And then each market, each country, each sector, each expert feel that they will specialize.

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Ethan L

But the specialization is just how you train a kid. All the kid has a brain power to process. And they learn the language. They learn English, they learn Chinese, they learn Japanese as a base language.

32:26.36

Ethan L

right They score A in their English class. They score A in their math class. okay And then they need to be trained and being taught for any of the specialist field with the right, accurate information.

32:43.76

Ethan L

right with the right interaction with the right art, right or cultural sense. ah sense right, then you will see so many applications that being very localized in each of the market or each of the field. but That's generally how it would likely ah happened.

33:09.01

Ethan L

And then, you know, fill out into the different field ah that for our day to day living.

**GOING GLOBAL AMID THE ASIAN CENTURY**

33:58.57

Ethan L

I'm always considering myself as a GoPro citizen. I know we started from Asia, right? You know, deeply looted from Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and many, um ah many places in Asia Pacific.

34:10.81

Ethan L

um it's a It's not an easy market to tackle because every single market is a different culture, different um payment system, right? So ah I was joking, right? To do European the payment, you only need to do one or two.

34:23.55

Ethan L

But for Asia, every single market, you need to two or three payment integration. you know, you end up integrating with 40 payment solution companies just in Asia alone. Right? And that's the ah just one example of the div diversification of to do a business in Asia Pacific, right. But that also forcing us to set the infrastructure that able to allow each market to put on top and forest from there, whether it's from language, from payment, from integration with the merchant, it built as an infrastructure and with a product coming to that infrastructure, to the foundation ah that we have as a core of the platform.

35:03.14

Ethan L

So that allows us to be very light expansion mood globally. That any place we go in, it just take a ah a year or two. So Japan as the original market, right, we started in two years ago, and now it's already one of the, you know, a very fast growing a consumer market for us.

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Ethan L

um So I think that's something I'm very proud of. But given my grow up and also, you know, Aries grow up, right? We always consider ourselves as a global citizen. So naturally, I think the diversified experience that Asia brings, right, is something very ah interesting at the world stage, right? For everyone to understand Asia is not just one place.

35:48.91

Ethan L

ah So that's something we really are looking forward to accelerate. ah to xar um Yeah, I think that's the fundamental what we really believe, right, is that there's no border in the I mean, there is a border for visa, but there's no border to be a global citizen. And one of the fundamental belief for us is so always how travel can bring people closer.

**GROWING WITHOUT A BIG HOME MARKET: CHALLENGES**

37:22.54

Ethan L

Yes. Well, it's not an easy journey, right? mean, I wish I have a big home market. So my biggest home market Asia. Right, so ah ah just similar to Europe, right? I mean, from that perspective, right, our biggest home market is Asia.

37:40.92

Ethan L

Yes, unfortunately, you know, we don't have a big home domestic market. But if you look at Asia, when you're taking out China, right, ah even Indonesia and, you know, India from a certain interaction perspective, also a very cross regional experience for the consumers.

38:01.61

Ethan L

Right. So

38:05.76

Ethan L

they da um it's Singapore, right? Singapore iss it it's it is ah it has to have that kind of a regional connection. but Hong Kong, similar, Thailand, even ja Japan has a very fast growing inbound ah market globally.

38:20.70

Ethan L

ah So ah we are just proud to be there to have Asia at the home market and we did the hard work, we did the dirty work. right Now we hope to bring that business model to the next scale in the global stage.

**TRAVEL, 20 YEARS ON**

39:04.67

Ethan L

Hmm, that's a very innovative question. 20 years is a very long lens. If you ask me back in 2005, that was year I went to college.

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Ethan L

2005, right? Do I see where I am right now? Do I see how the travel space has been evolving? Do I see the AI coming in that fast pace? I will tell you no. Right? You know, I was still someone who, you know, carry a lonely planning book and traveling around, you know, with information that that will not change it in five or 10 years time.

39:43.38

Ethan L

So, no, I, so 20 is a very, very long ranch ah But imagine what people can do, right? Assume human is heading to the right cooperative directions.

39:58.75

Ethan L

I do think a lot of things such as space travel, right? Deep ocean travel, like a lot of untouched territory that for ah for for a general market that's able to reach, I do think that will all become possible, right? In a 20 years time.

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Ethan L

i I personally hope to retire in 20 years time too. Because i think, you know, the next generation is is it going to be even more innovative, there's even more equipped of different tools that help them to do things in a 10 times efficient and better way.

**WILL IT BE TIME AT LAST FOR PARA-HAWKING?**

40:52.90

Ethan L

Oh, yes. I mean, I think now if we if that operator still exists, which they they're no longer running the that unique, they're just running the power gliding because power hawking, you need the person who actually was a hawk that they grew up with.

41:08.64

Ethan L

So it's a very, very neat thing. ah With the current traffic and everything we have, right we are we already doing you know hundreds of power gliding bookings per month.

41:20.58

Ethan L

Right? You say if it exists for the supply, will 10% actually pay a premium to have a power hawking? I will personally think so. Right? But that will be more of a surprise.

41:33.60

Ethan L

Because the supply doesn't exist anymore. Yes.

**PERSONAL FAVOURITE EXPERIENCES**

42:09.49

Ethan L

There's so many by now. It's very hard to pick. But the early days, there there was a lot of a small walking tools that you really understand a city.

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Ethan L

So I did a ghost hunting tool in Hong Kong, which actually goes through Wanjai, Khozui Bay, to all these You know, 100 years building and the story behind and why it's 100, right? as As you can also know, the Cantonese culture, right, especially in the 90s, 80s, so many ghost movies.

42:42.85

Ethan L

And all these ghost movies was inspired by all these pieces. So that was something very, very, very interesting for me to express. um And, you know, ever since that, actually started enjoying some of these kind of walking story type of tool that each city has.

42:58.83

Ethan L

um In Paris, I did a night but vampire tool. They actually walk into different places that has all the vampire stories and and the history behind.

43:11.44

Ethan L

So i think these are some of the very interesting that you can find in Kruk and also something I quite ah quitet and quite enjoy. And another end I personally like is all the outdoor adventure. So I booked our bungee jump, I did diving, haven't done sky jump, I want to do that very soon.

**GHOSTS AND POSSIBILITIES**

43:45.09

Ethan L

So here's right. You cannot prove that they doing they exist, but yeah but there's also no proof that they they don't exist. So what is it? So anything that cannot be verified or can be something very interesting learn and then looking at the imagination behind. And you always keep a very open-minded thought toward anything that's possible in the world.

44:17.04

Ethan L

yeah yeah I love possibilities. it' it's it's it's it's it's It's not also a good thing, right? So that's why I sometimes I need er to pull myself, to pull me back because when you have too many possibilities, you're not staying focused, right?

44:32.01

Ethan L

So the so of idea is how you understand the different possibilities, but also stay focused towards something you truly believe can success. Then coming back to a scale beatity the the execution, um and what is fundamental of that business model.