

FULL THROTTLE

What does it take to build the smartest of smartphones, a device that is both premium and affordable? More importantly, how do you create a loyal, loving cult of fans? **Carl Pei**, co-founder of **OnePlus**, tells *GQ* what's got the Chinese brand charged for greater success

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“

t's... Like love. It's hard to explain." Carl Pei's hand, holding a fork pushed through a chunk of pineapple, has paused on its way to his mouth, as he considers how to decode a mysterious tweet he put out three days earlier. "How do you explain what falling in love feels like to someone who's never experienced it before?" he'd written, adding the thinking face emoji.

I learn that Pei was in London with his long-distance girlfriend when he'd sent out this 98-character-long piece of existential inquiry into the universe. Turns out, Pei's preoccupation had nothing to do with matters of the heart: He was

talking about the infinitely more crucial subject of the Hertz count on smartphone displays.

"No user knows what the Hz on their phone is; indeed, no one knows why a bigger Hz is better either," the co-founder of OnePlus says, in an accent native to the world, not any specific part of it. "It makes scrolling seamless, and you get used to it before you know it. But until you do..." he trails off with a shrug.

The best in the tech industry at large have thrived by offering us things we didn't know we wanted until we got our hands on them. It wasn't until Steve Jobs presented the world with the smartphone as you know it today, that you realised how vital it was to your existence. It's not until 5G arrives in its full speedy glory that you'll be irked by how 4G – this magic bandwidth that lets you make a video call with anyone anywhere in the world – is too slow, *too slow*.

Just like true love: Until you've felt it, experienced it, had it happen to you, you've no idea you wanted it.

I will hear a more rehearsed version of this analogy 36 hours later, when Pei unveils the OnePlus 7 Pro (with a 90Hz display!) in Bengaluru. Dressed in an ink blue hoodie, acid-washed grey denims and sneakers, he will announce the world's biggest OnePlus experience centre in Hyderabad, a new edition of the Bullets Wireless and collaborations with Netflix and the e-sports giant Fnatic. And then he will declare to his captive audience (a roaring, screaming cult of fans that turns up in the thousands) that the brand has finally created the most beautiful smartphone it's capable of. "No notch, no bezel, no gimmicks," he will say. Just lots and lots of screen, speed, space and smarts; and the best camera a OnePlus device has ever featured (try the NightMode).

Right now, seated at Taj Yeshwantpura's fine dining restaurant Café Azure, Pei is swallowing black coffee and fresh fruit to beat the "jet lag of the day"; and remembering a time when smartphones weren't particularly savvy. Around the turn of the decade, "we were seeing phones where the USB port wasn't put in straight; or the port and the speaker wouldn't be aligned. The keys would be plasticky, cheap. One brand



had a heart rate sensor on the back of their phone," he scoffs, "and that just seemed like innovation for the sake of innovation." Except for Apple, he realised, no one seemed interested in building a good product.

In 2011, Pete Lau (founder of OnePlus) and he, then colleagues at the Chinese consumer tech brand Oppo, decided to jump in. "We saw something that wasn't perfect, and we wanted to make it better." When the OnePlus One became a resounding success, not least because of that clever invite-only marketing campaign, Pei remembers hiring a party yacht in Hong Kong for the company to celebrate. "We've grown into a team of 1,400 globally," he says, "but I think our entire company is still smaller than half of the engineering team of the second smallest brand. And I prefer it this way."

Like the patent Hollywood underdog tale, OnePlus has seen an astonishing rise to fame in five years, offering an Android smartphone that people all over the world actually care to stand in line for. Its razor-sharp focus on good products, smarter business models and fairer pricing has helped it expand very quickly into newer territories and come to be counted among the world's top five bestselling premium smartphone brands – along with Apple, Samsung, Huawei and Oppo.

India, now the fastest-rising market for smartphones, has been crucial to the brand's journey from the get-go. OnePlus says that Indian users make up 30 per cent of its global community, which is no surprise for a population that are sticklers for value and suckers for bargains. This is a big part of the reason why the launch is happening in Bengaluru. Which, in turn, is why our lunch is actually a hurried brunch – or, indeed, a very early breakfast, if we were to follow Pei's body clock, currently running on GMT – so he can squeeze in a few hours of rehearsals for the next day's big event.

Pei has the same air of mild fatigue about him as when we met last, six months earlier in Woking, UK, for the launch of the OnePlus 6T McLaren edition. Then, the self-confessed travel and food enthusiast had just arrived from a weekend of dirt biking and other adventures in Lisbon. It's been non-stop since: hopping between New York, Shenzhen (where OnePlus is headquartered), Stockholm (where he grew up); even stopping by Barcelona for the Mobile World Congress. →

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Though, he did take out time for a vacation in Japan: He visited the Cup Noodles Museum in Ikeda, was blown away by the *kaiseki* experience and “even tried to recreate that scene from *Lost In Translation* at the bar in Tokyo’s Park Hyatt.”

“A lot of sleepless nights, jet lag, highs and lows in quick succession,” Pei sums up his rich, globe-trotting entrepreneur life. “But then,” he quickly adds, “there is no one definition of success. You could choose to be successful in your health; in your relationships. This life isn’t for everyone.”

Born to a Chinese couple who moved from Beijing to the US and then settled in Sweden to continue their research work on dementia, Pei remembers being a rather violent child. But, over time, “I became quite Swedish, though it’s confusing again now that I’ve moved to Shenzhen.”

Growing up, Pei recalls wanting to be a kung fu instructor (“I watched a lot of Bruce Lee movies”), and also a policeman in Sweden. When he was 12, his parents brought home their first computer, a Dell Latitude or Longitude, he doesn’t remember which, with that noisy dial-up internet connection. “We were learning to make websites at school; I started surfing the internet. I don’t regret playing a lot of videogames; first-person shooters are said to increase your hand-eye coordination. They make you think faster.”

Like for any child of his generation, the internet offered an open field for wild experiments; far beyond ideas of right and wrong, as it were. Early on, he found a Pokémon guide in Japanese and translated its content for his own blog. In 2007-08, he travelled to South China to conduct some “primitive business”, sourcing MP3 players from the local electronics market and selling online to customers in the US and Europe.

Pei returned to study at the Stockholm School of Economics, but dropped out before submitting his thesis. “I learned nothing,” he says. “We were studying Industrial Age models of business from a hundred years ago, whereas the biggest drivers of our world were the tech industry, the rise of e-commerce and the Chinese development.” Even if he didn’t want the university to

get any credit for when he “became famous”, he does want to talk about his thesis. “I suggested that the group-buying model of e-commerce, like Groupon, was not sustainable. The idea, to build user loyalty, did not take into account that it was bargain hunters and students who used these services.” Groupon fizzled out in just ten years, “but Google had wanted to buy it for a billion dollars, which was a lot of money back then.”

Pei, a few months shy of turning 30, now wants to try his hand at angel investing this year. “There’s a dynamic start-up scene here, but they’re usually past the seed funding point by the time I hear about them,” he laughs. He thinks health tech has a lot of opportunity. “We’re going to need more of that, as developing countries prosper and new diseases like diabetes pop up; and we have an internationally ageing population who are also more aware of these things.”

Along with his obvious acumen for business, Pei’s realised his in-between status is actually an advantage, from where he stands. “US companies have a very hard time getting Asia, and vice versa. Asia doesn’t have a single consumer brand that’s famous globally, like a Nike or a Ford,” he says. “I’m fortunate to be able to straddle both worlds, communicate between the two.”

Pei and OnePlus’ bid for that title, of Asia’s first world-famous consumer goods brand, continues to hinge on truly smart and sturdy smartphones – for now. “Foldables are interesting, but we don’t yet have apps configured for such a large screen,” he sets the context. “5G is really coming and it will change how you use smartphones in the long run.” For instance, you might be able to instantly transfer files, like with AirDrop, to someone sitting on the other side of the planet. “There will be innovation on the camera front, but I feel we’re approaching a final form for the smartphone.”

For the first time, Pei says, OnePlus has actually put pen to paper and drafted a forward-looking three-year strategy. “Guess that’s a sign of maturity. We’ve spent a lot of time getting the basic things right. There’s no reason why we can’t challenge the bigger players in a more serious fashion while maintaining our focus on good products,” he says, now charged for the day after two espressos. “It’s a balance – and we’re ready.” ☕