Green Power's Quest to Change the World

By Marius Ziubrys

They made it into the freshly-launched CEIBS MBA Entrepreneurship Lab after a vigorous screening process by faculty and venture capital investors. But now what? How will the four-member Green Power team make the most of their 12 months in the E-Lab so they can realise their lofty goal of changing the world? Their dream is to create a new, healthy lifestyle in China by providing in-home solutions to food safety concerns and air pollution.

I meet with the project's Innovation Leader Sara Shen (CEIBS MBA 2016) in a modest space carved out of the large VIP canteen that sits atop the student centre at CEIBS. Only a discreet sign that says E-Lab, a few laptops and a handful of papers on the table suggest that it must be the entrepreneurship incubator. Her colleague and classmate Liz Zhu, who is responsible for marketing and sales, joins the conversation. This is only half of their team: their financial planner Yun Choi had classwork to catch up on, and their engineer Matthew Sun works outside the campus.

So, what is the Green Power project about? Sara gets straight to the point. "China faces pollution and environmental problems, and we want to find a special solution: to start small and help families to have better living standards, especially safe food and better air quality," she explains. She admits that it is not a new idea. The notion is already quite mature in countries such as Singapore, the US and especially in Japan. A few years ago Japan had a massive disaster – an earthquake followed by a nuclear power plant meltdown which heavily polluted the environment. Naturally, families were concerned about food safety and were looking for solutions. "We work on these ideas and want to go further – to provide solutions fit for a Chinese family," says Shen, who has no doubt about how badly Green Power is needed in China.

Zhu provides more details as she opens her laptop and points at a slide that has a sketch of their prototype. "Generally speaking, it's a device which you can put in your home. It will grow organic vegetables and produce oxygen at the same time," she explains. The project is still in the early phase and they hope to have their first prototype built by the end of this summer. Their agricultural system should provide continuous production by controlling temperature, humidity, light, water and nutrients for the plants. They're focused on working hard so their project will be a success, but they are smart enough to have a Plan B if things do not go as planned.

But Shen and her team mates are optimistic: "We hope to create a new lifestyle for everyone," she says. They are hoping they will be able to deliver a modern, efficient agricultural system that can meet the needs of a family of five to six people. "As every single venture capitalist is saying, it's not easy to start a new business," adds Shen. "We are facing a lot of challenges now; but we'll never give up." The team is working on different possible solutions, talking to their target customers to better understand their needs so they have a project that works as intended – and helps make people's lives better. They know it won't be easy, and that their passion to push the project along will be vital. "We want to make sure that the drive behind this project will remain the same even after five years," says Shen.

They have a good start, with support from the E-lab. It provides help on everything from advice provided by CEIBS entrepreneurship professors to facilitating access to VCs for projects that make it to the end of their one-year stay. They also have a chance to participate in private companies' board discussions and learn more about how business is really done. In fact even before moving into the incubator, students are taught how to prepare a business plan. Once their projects are accepted to the E-Lab, they receive one-on-one mentoring, get access to the school's vast alumni network, are introduced to potential investors, get access to angel funds, management consultants and other needed services such as legal or finance. During the moving out phase for those that successfully last a year, the E-lab helps to find them a new physical space and provides all the necessary suggestions and recommendations needed for the new business to survive outside the incubator. "People are very happy to help us, and hopefully we can deliver value to all our stakeholders," says Shen.

The odds appear to be in their favour. A lot of similar products on the market are expensive and not everyone can afford them. The Green Power team's main challenge is to achieve a technological breakthrough which would make home agricultural systems better and more affordable. They want to start small in China's first tier cities where more people are beginning to care about food safety and pollution. "Now we are putting a lot of effort on product development," says Zhu. "It's also a race against time as there are other teams doing similar projects at the same time."

If the project goes smoothly, the team of young entrepreneurs is planning to launch a massive marketing campaign in early 2016. "First, we want to make sure that as many people as possible get to know about our product," says Shen. "We want to join different kinds of competitions, especially the entrepreneurial ones. Second, we want to do some personal branding... And share some of our ideas with people with similar mind-sets... we want to work and grow together with them."