There’s no disputing that Shenzhen has become one of the most important places in the world of tech.

Nowhere else has quite as potent a combination of tech know-how, cheap manufacturing costs, and sheer speed.

But it goes further than that. Living in Shenzhen is in many ways like living in the future.

And not necessarily a utopian future. More like the other kind.

Consider Zowee.

Zowee operates a factory much like any other in Shenzhen. They make cheap smartphones and other electronics.

Like other top manufacturers, they’ve built a complex where workers can live right beside the factory line,

work around the clock for a couple of years, and hopefully buy a better life for their families back home.

The factories here are clean, and the work is precise.

But things are changing quickly in a way that does not favor the common man and woman.

All the rest of these lines are staffed by about 80 people, but right here there are new machines coming online

that are going to build a smartphone end-to-end completely by robots.

The end goal of something like this is to get the quality of the products higher, to bring costs down from less labor,

and ultimately to keep China as the manufacturing hub of the world

and fend off low-priced competition from places like Southeast Asia.

The factory of the future looks like this.

It’s a closed off loop where robots pass components among each other,

and finished products pop out at the end.

All those workers have been replaced by one lonely final inspector.

It’s a strong sign that the future of Shenzhen is less for these guys...

...and more for these guys.

Zowee actually builds these automation machines itself. Behind me are some of China’s best and brightest engineers,

hard at work building the machines you see out on the floor today,

and the ones that are coming tomorrow that are going to automate the entire factory line.

Nowhere will face more turmoil than Shenzhen as the robots rise and send millions of workers to the unemployment line.

But it’s not just the working class that’s facing a dark future.

There are dystopian innovations that seem to touch every facet of life here.

I ran into one example of this while attempting to rehydrate.

After some investigation, I discover what’s going on here, and it has to do with these things: QR codes.

You know the drill. You scan the code and something pops up on your phone, like a promotion or discount.

America laughed these things off years ago, but here, they run the entire economy.

Cash and credit cards are history. Instead you scan QR codes to pay for everything: restaurants, groceries, even buskers.

On the surface this is all good. It’s the easy, convenient mobile payment system of the future.

But there’s also a dark side.

The Chinese government can peer into the two dominant payment systems, AliPay and WeChat, as it sees fit.

It’s already started tracking behavior as part of a plan to rank citizens and measure how good and obedient they are.

The tech revolution may have brought prosperity to Shenzhen

but it’s also brought more and more insidious intrusions into people’s lives.

To dig deeper into life under the Chinese deep state,

I’ve assembled a team of extraordinary foreigners who work at tech startups in Shenzhen.

Hopefully a few beers will encourage them to open up about their thought crimes.

Living in a very tightly regulated Communist country - does that bother you, or you don’t care?

The presumption at least that I got before I came from Australia was sort of like moving into a sort of like a militarized state,

like things are going to be really intense. But like, you take a beer, just like walk down the road, hang out in the park, fine.

Do that back in my hometown in Australia, like, straight to the cop-house.

But then, play spikeball on the grass, and then all of a sudden the cops come and stop you.

Well and you got, you jaywalked and you had facial recognition?

I actually got this. So I was jaywalking in Nanxian. And all of a sudden I got a fine to my WeChat.

Was it instant?

It was about 20 seconds after, I guess. I had money in my balance and it just went straight out.

This is just for the one thing - it just came straight out.

Didn’t even authorize it. That’s crazy.

It’s true. Try to jaywalk in certain parts of Shenzhen, and the government’s facial recognition will spot you.

There’s even a board of shame, showing the faces of recent offenders.

I’m surprised and very very worried that they have your face in the facial recognition - like, the facial recognition system.

But they have everyone’s though. When you go across the border they take that picture, exactly, yeah.

So it’s all in the system, they know where you are.

That’s scary.

It gets even scarier. Because big brother is watching what you do online too.

Most of the websites we know and love are blocked in China, replaced with Chinese equivalents that the government can monitor:

a sort of mirror universe internet.

I asked my friend Diane, a Shenzhen native, to help break this down.

Appropriately enough, she took me to this restaurant staffed entirely by robots.

That’s some gnarly-looking chicken. Is that chicken?

Mmm... robot food.

I wanted you to help you out with one thing. So if I sorta call out a U.S. tech company, can you tell me the Chinese equivalent?

>Because you know, you can’t get Instagram or anything here, so.

Let’s do a few.

So Google would be...

>Baidu.

>And Amazon...

is like, both JD.com and also Taobao

OK. And, and, um. YouTube?

>Youqu. Youqu, Iqiyi.

Facebook?

Facebook we have WeChat. Yeah.

Do you feel like you’re in a different universe? All the online stuff is such a big part of all our lives.

And it seems like China has created its own world.

Yeah, that’s definitely like that. But like I said, for for like Instagram, I was surprised to see even -

Instagram got banned from China, but all the young people, they’re there.

Still go. Yeah.

It turns out it is possible to access the freedom-loving internet here, via what’s called a VPN:

an alternate internet connection that bypasses the government’s blocks.

And you don’t get in trouble if they see that you’re on the VPN all the time?

For personal use, I don’t think that’s that big of a deal, yeah.

The future will be interesting for how the different worlds are collaborating together.

Yeah, and definitely the young generation, they’re not like just, oh, I’m satisfied just to kind of stay inside. Yeah, they’re more curious.

I came to Shenzhen hoping to find some kind of ground truth,

a clear picture of what China’s growing tech prowess will mean for the rest of us.

Honestly though, I’m as confused as ever.

The city is full of energy, desire and creativity.

But exactly how those traits are channeled in the years ahead remains an open question.

My hope is that the best parts of our human nature get a chance to thrive,

and that 1984 can wait a few more decades to arrive.

And on that note, I leave you with this dashboard dog.

Because it’s obviously good and pure and very happy.