

(The train to Luowu is approaching)

"Top places to go along the Shenzhen metro line."

"I go to Shenzhen with my friends when it's a holiday. I haven't been there since Shenzhen got more developed. Many friends have told me that it's really fun and I want to see if it's really that awesome."

"Here we go." (Next stop is Futian)

"It only takes half an hour to the mainland. We go there once a week."

In recent years, it's been a trend for youngsters to have fun in Shenzhen. What exactly is attracting youngsters to Shenzhen? How has the Hong Kong-Shenzhen consumer culture changed over the last few years?

ALL THE WAY NORTH

"We get off at Luowu station, which station are we going to next? The Convention and Exhibition Center station? You're leading, I have no clue."

"Don't worry. There are trains departing from Luowu directly."

This is the first time for Angus, 20, to go to Shenzhen for fun.

"Indeed, there have been many people traveling to the mainland, especially the youngsters. After all, the news regarding the mainland is mostly negative, and the culture and the quality of the citizens are not so good. News about using waste oil, or people saying that you'd consume all elements on the periodic table each time you go up there and eat."

"There are so many people. I haven't been to this station before. We'll clear customs right after exiting (this station)."

"Let's go! Tap this when you enter and insert it when you exit."

"People are flooding in. Let's move here."

"It's not as dirty as I imagined."

"I think they've got some new trains."

Joanne, Agnes's friend, visits Shenzhen a few times a year on average. A Chinese tea drink shop in a mall in the Futian district is where Joanne would take Agnes as the first stop of the trip.

"I searched online and people had been saying how amazing it is, great taste and long lines. They said it's a must-do in mainland China so I'm taking her there."

Although one could use a mainland mobile application to pre-order and pay in order to reduce wait time, Agnes and Joanne didn't install that application due to privacy concerns.

"It doesn't seem safe, it's not that good when it comes to privacy. You don't know how the data would be used. They might give them to the central (government)."

"Right now, it might take longer for us to prepare your order. Is 20-30 minutes alright?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"Where should we sit?"

"I'm so thirsty."

"How long have we been waiting?"

"Over half an hour."

"Right."

(distant vibration)

"It's us, it's us!"

"That's someone else's."

"The device is vibrating!"

"Alright. Let's drink."

"I do understand why people would purposefully visit Shenzhen and get this. Very few of the Taiwanese drink shops in Hong Kong provide seating for customers to chill and wait. However, if the wait time is this long and you need to clear customs just for this, it might not be that worthwhile."

"Should we try this karaoke cube?"

"How's the sound isolation?"

"Do we just get in? Do we need to pay?"

"We can insert coins here."

"Doesn't seem to be working. What should we do?"

"Can't do anything if we can't pay."

"Oh. It requires login via WeChat."

"The white one seems easy to claw. Let's try."

"Nah, it also requires payment through WeChat."

"Scanning QR code is required again?"

"Yes."

"It's 'bullying' us just because we don't have the application."

"Digital payment. Digital payment again?"

"Can we pay in cash?"

"Yes."

Having explored a few places in the mall, they could finally pay cash to play.

"Feels like they are catching up Hong Kong's pace, perhaps they are really getting more advanced. For payment methods, maybe it's even more advanced than Hong Kong, setting the privacy issues aside. There weren't many skyscrapers in Shenzhen as I recall but now we can see so many huge malls."

The rise of the number of huge malls in Shenzhen is astonishing. According to the statistics from local media, the number of malls has multiplied to 150 in the last 4 years.

"Is this where we are?"

“Malls in mainland China are slightly more diverse. Hong Kong is small and many shops in the malls are rented to top brands for more profit instead of leaving out spaces to have claw machines or small-scaled entertainment.”

“That’s so quick, I’m getting dizzy.”

“Taking the high-speed rail to Hong Kong is the most convenient way. It only takes around 10 minutes. It’s dark, not much to see, rather boring.”

Xiaofang and Ahqing are interior designers from Shenzhen. They visit Hong Kong regularly to shop and get inspired.

“Well-known international brands usually get to Hong Kong before entering Asia or the mainland, seeing Hong Kong as a spot to test the water. Therefore, in general you can get in touch with more new brands sooner in Hong Kong.”

“Yes, go up, let’s go. Seems like we have to get up there.”

“We have to make a turn over there, towards Des Voeux Road Central.”

Xiaofang thinks that there are so many huge malls in mainland already so he doesn’t visit huge malls but unique streets and boutiques in Hong Kong.

“This is great.”

“The special number of today is...”

“This is the warehouse.”

“Their warehouse also looks similar.”

“In fact, Hong Kong has so many distinctive streets which can be very attractive to young people to visit. In the mainland, there aren’t. There are so many malls and gigantic shopping centers, which has its own advantage, but lacks some milk of human kindness.”

They are also aware that more young people from Hong Kong have been consuming in Shenzhen in recent years, and believe that could be related to the entrepreneurial environments of the two locales.

“The operation cost in Hong Kong is extremely high so it’s quite difficult to start a new business. People would choose a rather safe way to do businesses or projects. On the other hand, the operation cost in the mainland is comparatively low so people could be more willing to take bolder risks. Perhaps that’s what young people from Hong Kong love, they have more choices.”

For Xiaofang and Ahqing, most of their interior design projects are from the restaurant and foodservice industry. They’ve witnessed the development of the foodservice brands from Hong Kong and Shenzhen in the mainland over the past few years.

“In around 2012, there were some good foodservice brands entering the mainland and it actually helped lift up the standard and quality of the mainland's foodservice industry. Today, the foodservice industry in the mainland has advanced in so many facets, such as the food and product itself, branding, even space utilization, and they are gradually closing the gap, or even outperforming those Hong Kong brands.”

At the end of last year, a tea drink shop from the mainland arrived in Hong Kong, opened several branches in a row and made waves in the society.

"There's a line."

"There's still a small group of people in line."

"Egg waffle."

"Has this been changed?"

"No, not yet."

"It's easy to get dirty."

The Shatin branch of the tea drink shop is Xiaofang and Ahqing's company's first design project in Hong Kong. While the mainland used to be heavily influenced by Hong Kong's culture, the competence of the two cities has waxed and waned. Mainland brands are now attracting Hong Kong young people to visit and consume.

"Indeed, having developed for a few decades, China has gradually nurtured its manufacturing power and creativity. Therefore, Chinese are courageous to launch their own products or brands. It's a sign of self-confidence. This phenomenon shows a real sign of 'return'."

"Over there!"

"For 2. This way please."

"What? You can order frog?"

"What? You want to have that?"

"No..."

"Phew!"

"Is it spicy?"

"There are two chili symbols."

"It looks really delicious."

This is the first time for Agnes, 20, to visit the mainland with a friend. She seldom visits the mainland as issues around food safety have held her back.

"The fish is smooth in a strange way, considering how long we've been boiling it. I'm not sure what they'd added to prepare it. Food safety inspection in the mainland is not so good. Even though some products might not fulfill the safety standard, they could still be approved to be sold. On the other hand, Hong Kong perhaps has a better system. If the product was tested to be unqualified, the manufacturer could be sued and citizens would feel more reassured."

Through web searches and recommendations from friends, they have learnt that this restaurant is very popular among Hong Kongers. They believe it's because the brand has been utilizing the internet well for marketing and promotion.

"I think the branding and promotion is pretty well done. Nowadays, it's common to have Youtubers visiting and introducing different places. Young people enjoy watching Youtube videos to see where's fun and cheap to go so this would motivate more teenagers to go and have fun."

"When I watch videos about Youtubers introducing attractions in some other countries, I would be tempted to go and try. Even though sometimes when you get there and it might not be as impressive as portrayed, they really did make you want to try."

"It's rising, it's rising!"
"It's ready!"

Jacky, 18, visits Shenzhen with her friend Qiqi once a week on average. Before each trip, they will go online and search for the latest trendy spots.

"This bakery is gigantic. It has two stories. There's no way that you could find a bakery with this scale in Hong Kong. Also, the open kitchen presents an extremely high level of transparency."

Jacky thinks as kitchens of restaurants and shops in the mainland adopt a more transparent design, people are having more confidence in food safety in the mainland.

"It's said that this chicken is the award-winning dish of this restaurant."

As far as the source or origin of the food ingredient, she doesn't think about it that much.

"Not just for restaurants in the mainland, even for restaurants in Hong Kong you might not know where the ingredients are from. You can't even see the kitchen but you'll still eat anyways so I'm not so concerned. We eat so much food that we don't actually know what it is anyways."

Jacky and her family have been visiting her aunt who works in Shenzhen since she was small, so she is very familiar with Shenzhen. Throwing back six or seven years ago, her friends wouldn't visit Shenzhen for fun, seeing the mainland as a less developed area, a place which fell behind.

"Spaces used to be quite filthy and there weren't many places for entertainment or leisure. There's even one time that I hopped onto an illegal cab and I got deceived."

"Since grade 8 or 9, I've started going to Shenzhen with my friends for fun. At first, it's through group buying via some mobile applications and we picked some comparatively novel things to try, like baseball and archery."

Until recent years, districts which are close to Hong Kong such as Futian district or Nanshan district have been hosting a variety of distinctive shops and exhibits, attracting lots of Hong Kong teenagers to visit and take photos to check-in.

"In these two years, there have been a lot of people speaking Cantonese, a lot of Hong Kongers around me whenever I am in the mainland. Particularly, for places that are more

distinctive or attractive, there have been so many girls travelling as a group just to take photos.”

“So far, I guess Hong Kong has so few recreational facilities and spots for ‘check-in’ thus people would switch to Shenzhen rather than staying in Hong Kong.”

Ahqing, a millennial born in the 80s, is from Shenzhen. He studied commercial design at a university in Hunan and returned to Shenzhen after graduation. He co-founded an interior design company with Xiaofang in 2011 and it just happened to be the time when Shenzhen’s economy and the foodservice industry were undergoing a rapid and drastic change.

“You can demolish the flying junction in a week because there will be a larger transport hub.”
“I’m pretty surprised to see that the bridge is gone because I haven’t heard of any plans regarding the demolition. On the other hand, this kind of thing is quite common in Shenzhen. There could be large construction projects every month or half a month or some old, memorable buildings got demolished. Shenzhen has been developing so rapidly. The buildings used to be quite unitary, like plants, or buildings which imitated the old ones in Hong Kong. Today, it really has spruced up.”

“We didn’t realize that this place has been renovated.”

“This brand was our first project. This shop is located in the heart of Shenzhen.”

The (manager of the) cafe approached them for an interior design project in 2014. Several years have passed and the cafe has already been renovated to adopt new trends.

“Restaurants and cafes used to adopt designs with dimmer lighting to match with the general impression of what a coffee shop would look like. However, people have changed their experience preference. Everyone likes taking photos but dim lighting is not suitable for it. Therefore, all the shops are bright now. In fact, when we were working on our first project, it’s an exploration, more like an imitation. Yet, after some time, when we looked back to the work, there’s no longer any novelty there. We then reflected whether re-presenting what others had done was a right choice. This reflection led us to create something different.”

“The entire installation utilizes containers which can all be found in laboratories. In the past, few people would do it like this and we want to use a new way to display tea leaves.”

Ahqing and Xiaofang are curating an exhibit for a tea merchant, mainly marketing to young people.

“He is our tea sommelier.”

“In fact, many trendy brands like to have the sales dressed up like this to interact with young people.”

“Now, we are making our Oolong Tea No.5.”

Ahqing believes that young people who were born in the 90s and 00s have become the primary consumer group. Different brands need to cater for young people’s preferences in terms of interior design and frame their products and brands into a more juvenile way.

“Especially since Generation Z has become the major consumer group for casual dining, with consumer’s demand in mind, the foodservice brands need to research on the suitable price and tastes for these consumers.”

Apart from attracting mainland teenagers, foodservice brands in Shenzhen have led Hong Kong’s teenagers making a beeline for their products and services in recent years. However, as Ahqing and Xiaofang observed, the current proportion of Hong Kong consumers in the market is not large so it is not the biggest consideration for their clients.

“It is because the majority of the consumers are still from the mainland or Shenzhen, the local consumers who still consume more frequently on a day-to-day basis.”

“Chinese people’s aesthetic standards have improved and consequently, more and more Hong Kong people are accepting it. This is a major trend because China’s economic development has been doing really well. In addition, behind economic development, it’s cultural export. I believe in 3 to 5 years, many more Chinese brands can get farther.”

“Could you pay for us?”

“Don’t you guys have this (WeChat)?”

“No.”

“Thank you. Here’s 10 RMB in cash.” “Thank you.”

“It is timed. We can only do one song.”

(I keep heading north, leaving those seasons with you behind.)

“I would also be worried about our entertainment and culture being caught up by the mainland.”

“In the past, every household in the mainland would watch Hong Kong’s tv shows which had strong Hong Kong characteristics. Now, Hong Kong people would choose to watch mainland shows. I’m afraid that they would be influenced by the mainland’s culture, love using mainland slang.”

“I think Hong Kong people should preserve our own culture.”

(Next station, SheungShui.)