

BUSINESSFOCUS

Digital lists empowering local businesses

User reviews and geolocation data turn forgotten backstreets into viral destinations

By CHENG YU
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On a balmy evening in Nanchang, Jiangxi province, the aroma of slow-simmered soup wafts from a narrow alley. Inside a 39-square-meter shop barely wide enough for two rows of tables, the clang of ladles and the chatter of diners never stop.

Wang Li, the boss of Hengmao Soup, wipes her brow as she lifts yet another steaming clay pot from the charcoal stove — her 1,000th of the day. During the National Day holiday, the soup shop saw its online traffic spike 272 percent compared with normal days.

“It’s been like this since we were put on the ‘Must-Eat List’, which is a user-driven food ranking of Dazhong Dianping under the internet company Meituan. People come from all over the country and line up for hours just to taste our soup,” she said.

This humble eatery, glowing late into the night under neon lights, has become a symbol of a new wave of consumption sweeping across China — one powered not by luxury malls or online flash sales, but by small, deeply local businesses.

As China looks to consumption to drive its economic momentum, scenes like this are being celebrated as part of a larger economic story.

Chen Xinhua, president of the China Hospitality Association, said, “Local flavors and smaller businesses have become an increasingly vital force in boosting consumption.”

This year’s Government Work Report again emphasized consumption as the “main engine and stabilizing anchor” of economic growth.

Last year, China’s total retail sales of consumer goods reached 48.8 trillion yuan (\$6.81 trillion), up 3.5 percent year-on-year. Final consumption expenditure contributed 44.5 percent to overall GDP growth, said the National Bureau of Statistics — a sign that despite global headwinds, domestic demand remains the country’s strongest ballast.

Behind these headline figures lies a new understanding of what drives people to spend — not just convenience or necessity, but experience, emotion and connection.

Over the National Day holiday, millions of Chinese travelers turned the country into one sprawling tasting tour.

According to Dazhong Dianping, traffic to its “Must-Eat List” surged nearly 180 percent compared with the previous month. Major cities like Shanghai; Beijing; Guangzhou, Guangdong province; Chengdu, Sichuan province; and Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, led the pack, but smaller cities emerged as the real “dark horses”.

Local culinary hotspots such as Nanchang; Quanzhou, Fujian province; and Zhuhai, Guangdong province, saw list traffic soar over 217 percent, driving orders up by more



Above: People dine at a restaurant listed on Dazhong Dianping’s “Must-Eat List” in Changzhou, Jiangsu province, on July 13.

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Left: Tourists enjoy local specialties at the Mingqing ancient commercial hub in Zhangye, Gansu province, on Oct 5.

YANG XIAO / FOR CHINA DAILY

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Chen Xinhua, president of the China Hospitality Association

48.8 trillion yuan

China’s total retail sales of consumer goods in 2024, according to the National Bureau of Statistics

than 220 percent. Across the nation, over 70 percent of hustle and bustle eateries — neighborhood stores known for their local flavors — saw their traffic double.

In the backstreets of Nanjing, Jiangsu province, a noodle shop found itself overwhelmed by travelers following the app’s map. “We sold hundreds of pounds of eel in a week,” said its owner surnamed Xu, who has run the stall for over a decade. “We added 10 more outdoor tables just to keep up. I never

expected the list to be so powerful.”

His eatery, which has been listed on the platform for 13 years, boasts a 4.1 rating for taste. A recent reviewer summed it up, “Waited an hour, finished in 10 minutes. Worth every second.”

These “hidden gems” — often family-run, decades-old businesses — are now national stars, riding a wave of digital discovery that blends tourism with grassroots commerce.

As travelers seek more personal,

place-based experiences, taste tourism became a defining keyword of 2024.

In the southern city of Liuzhou, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, Huang Ji Soy Milk is run by a group of sisters who serve freshly fried dough sticks and handmade soy milk until 3 am.

“We’ve been here for nearly 10 years,” said the 54-year-old owner. “People come because it tastes like (how it was in) their childhood.”

The sisters refuse to use

machines. Soybeans are soaked by hand for exactly 10 hours in winter, less in summer. Dough is kneaded until translucent before frying. “My son helps now,” she said. “It’s not just a business, it’s a craft.”

In Guangzhou, Liang Xin Ji, a small snack shop that has been open for 17 years, saw a boom both in-store and online.

The same appetite extended to online platforms. According to Meituan, orders for highly rated “Must-Eat” restaurants surged by

Chinese travelers crave experiences over mere scenery

By CHENG YU

On a crisp autumn evening, laughter echoes in Qiyun Mountain, a Taoist tourist spot in Xiuning county of Huangshan, Anhui province.

At the bustling dice hall, Lu Mengya, a visitor from Shanghai, is caught in a playful standoff with a costumed non-player character, or NPC, and a local actor dressed in flowing robes.

“Come, young master, place your bet!” the actor teases. Lu rolls the dice, wins a handful of silver-printed coins and bursts into laughter.

“I didn’t expect to come to a mountain and end up playing an ancient dice game,” she said. “It’s not just sightseeing. It feels like time-travel with friends.”

That, in essence, is the new face of China’s domestic tourism. At a time when travelers crave experiences over mere scenery, Qiyun Mountain

is rewriting what a mountain getaway means.

Once known mainly for its mist-shrouded Taoist peaks, the resort has evolved into an immersive playground that blends nature, storytelling, and interaction.

Since early 2025, the resort has rolled out what it calls the new generation of experience tour, which has been designed to meet the growing appetite from visitors for personalized and diversified travel.

The revamped experience stretches beyond daytime sightseeing. With the slogan “Entertain by day, Immersive by Night”, the resort has launched a lively ancient-style town where tourists can slip into fantasy worlds inspired by Chinese mythology and martial arts lore.

Four themed zones host more than 100 live performances across 50 activities, ranging from role-playing quests to marketplace

games. Visitors can earn and spend the resort’s exclusive in-game currency by completing challenges or winning games with NPCs, adding a sense of adventure and reward to their stay.

The numbers tell a story of success.

From January to September, the resort received 1.81 million visitors, up 21.3 percent year-on-year. With in that, 426,600 people entered the scenic mountain area, marking a 36.5 percent surge year-on-year.

During the National Day holiday, visitors number reached 291,400, with a 14.9 percent jump in mountain entries, which is evidence that the immersive approach is resonating with travelers.

What sets Qiyun Mountain apart is its deliberate fusion of cultural narrative and modern entertainment logic.

Instead of simply preserving heritage, the resort is turning

ancient folklore into living stories that visitors can enter, touch and influence. Each NPC character, from wandering swordsmen to hidden scholars, is trained to improvise with guests, building spontaneous connections that feel part theater, part game.

As China’s tourism industry transitions from sightseeing to experience-based consumption, destinations like Qiyun Mountain are extending their value chain, from tickets and accommodation to cultural IP, nighttime economy and retail.

It has become a blueprint for how traditional scenic spots can reinvent themselves as immersive cultural theme parks, appealing to young travelers who expect interaction, emotion and Instagram-worthy moments.

“Visitors today don’t just want to see something — they want to feel part of it. We aim to create a place



A performance of *dashuhua*, or striking iron flowers, dazzles spectators with a brilliant shower of sparks resembling a tree canopy in Huangshan, Anhui province, in October. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

where stories unfold with the traveler inside them,” said Huang Ying, director of the culture, tourism and sports bureau of Xiuning.

As twilight descends, lanterns flicker to life and the air fills with the rhythm of drums. NPCs roam the

165 percent among non-local users during the holidays. In cities like Shanghai, Chengdu in Sichuan province and Shenzhen in Guangdong province, delivery-based taste tourism has become the new norm, where people order famous local meals to their hotel rooms, treating each bite like a destination.

Delivery riders felt it too. In Changsha in Hunan province, courier Wei Wangjun recalled: “More than half my deliveries went to hotels and some smaller restaurants. Some even used the one-to-one rush delivery to make sure the food arrived hot and perfect.”

From the outside, these are just food stories. But behind every bubbling pot and smoky wok lies a deeper economic pulse.

China’s small businesses — from family diners to street vendors — account for over 90 percent of registered enterprises and employ hundreds of millions. Their vitality is central to the nation’s consumption upgrade — a shift from mass production to personalized experience, from mere spending to emotional resonance.

Digital platforms like Meituan have become unlikely engines of this transformation, using user reviews and geolocation data to turn forgotten backstreets into viral destinations. Local governments, meanwhile, are experimenting with new incentives — from digital coupons to community street-market festivals — to keep this grassroots momentum alive.

Sheng Hong, a deputy to the National People’s Congress, said in an interview that reviving consumption must start from the street corner rather than city center.

“In my visits, I found that many people, including tourists who come for city walks, prefer local, down-to-earth small shops with character and warmth. Modern consumption is about engaging all five senses. Yet, there’s still a gap between people’s expectations and what they experience,” Sheng said.

She noted that younger consumers, especially Generation Z — those born between 1995 and the early 2000s, seek more than just pop-up novelty. They want immersive, lasting, and emotionally rich spaces, where they can linger, connect and create memories.

For families, that means kid-friendly zones where parents can shop or dine while children play. For international visitors, it means easier access to reliable local recommendations — where to eat, where to explore and how to join the crowd — Sheng added.

But to keep this “human warmth” alive, in her view, the flame of a fair business environment must be alight. She called for better protection of small vendors’ rights, including reducing rent pressure, refining regulations and supporting small businesses.

In the end, China’s consumption revival may not come from grand shopping malls or digital megasales. It may come from the steam rising off a clay pot in Nanchang, or the laughter spilling out of a noodle stall in Nanjing, Jiangsu province.

Because in a country of 1.4 billion, the true flavor of recovery and the future of economic growth may just begin with a single bite, she said.

For tourists, it’s more than a vacation, it’s a living stage where the line between guest and character disappears,” Huang said.