

Challenger brands to watch in 2022: Manner Coffee - for accelerating a new national ritual

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Around the 19th century, the price of tea in China was a fervently discussed subject for the British House of Commons. Its ferocious trade, and tightly controlled markets made it a hot topic, to the extent that to ask someone 'What it had to do with the price of tea in China', was the ultimate snub indicating you thought their comments entirely irrelevant. And whilst this diss may have faded into obscurity, the epic rise of the Chinese coffee market may be a suitable modern-day update.



Manner coffee has proved to be one such brand, pouring its challenger spirit out to the world at large. Founded in 2015, Manner almost came to a bitter end when its first store in Nantong (南通), a prefecture-level city in south-eastern Jiangsu province, proved unsuccessful due to the lack of existing coffee culture. Unperturbed, founder Han Yu and his wife relocated to Shanghai, in true David vs Goliath fashion, to compete in the most densely populated coffee-shop capital of the world. In a 2-metre square kiosk sandwiched between a building entryway and shop, the odds were stacked. In fact, it's reported that some national media outlets likened it to the ill-fated cupcake shop of the American sitcom 2 Broke Girls.

Despite this alleged roasting, Han Yu's caffeine dream came to bloom. In its third month, Manner was selling hundreds of cups a day, and it tentatively expanded across the next two years to eight stores. Today with more than 300 stores in mainland China and an incredible \$4.5bn valuation, Manners' alchemic blend of product, processes, and culture are clearly leaving a pleasant taste.

The brand's tagline 'Good coffee, made in China' embellishes the cups and the doors of its head office. In the early days, all the coffee beans for Manner were hand-picked and roasted by Han; with growth this turned into opening a roasting plant that Han still regularly visits. Unlike many established chains (both Western imports and native incumbents), Manner uses semi-automatic coffee machines, requiring a much higher level of skill to operate. This, in turn, was the seed for its barista training centre, and Manner baristas go through several months of training, a practice unheard of in China. The salary of a general manager at Manner is notably higher than those of Starbucks, and apprentices are recruited with the sole experience requirement of "Enthusiasm for coffee".

However, Manners' most interesting challenger tenet is perhaps not in its humble beginnings or local-gone-global love story, but in its strategic deployment of collaborations and content-commerce. To be clear, the power of the collab is not some quiet trick of marketers in the know but a fundamental pillar of brand expansion in the Chinese market. Yet Manner has hit

the consumer sweet spot by teaming up with suitably young and buzzy friends, with a mid-to-upmarket lifestyle aspiration factor, that artfully build out the Manner universe.

Take their collaboration with Neiwai, for example. Though its execution was simple (a limited edition of drinks and mood-setting video encompassing both brands), it is also a fellow Shanghai-born challenger, with body positivity and diversity at its core. Like Manner, it lives the ethos of going against what's expected of the category.

Another dynamic pair up saw lifestyle store Beast (florist turned home textiles, furniture beauty, fragrance store) create a bespoke collection for its Panda Puff perfume launch. The Panda Latte incorporated notes of the perfume's scent profile and its sky blue colour theme. It also came with a miniature bag with a tiny sample of the fragrance inside and converted one Manner store to a Beast-branded panda theme, proving immensely popular with fans. This kind of multi-sensory activation is both a far cry from the category standard and the broader market norm of relying heavily on Idols and KOL's. The Manner world and its friends within are considered and reflective of their values, not a mere numbers-driver.

However, the best embodiment of a values-led collaboration is with Manners' crossover with Ullens Center for Contemporary Art. When China's largest-ever show of works from Andy Warhol came to debut, Manner formulated a special-edition Banana Latte (and themed cup holder of course) to publicise the show and add yet another layer of merch-tainment-esque virality to the collection. These small moments of surprise and delight have created a big impact for Manner, and Warhol's eternal wisdom is certainly not lost on them: "You need to let the little things that would ordinarily bore you suddenly thrill you."

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