

A summer of growing up

Facebook-era kids learn social skills at camp, and most end up loving it, writes Susan Schwartz

CAMP CHOICES

Hong Kong Institute of Languages offers a selection of camps around the world to immerse children in a foreign language in its native environment while they enjoy sports, recreational and cultural activities.

Beijing: July 3-July 23, July 16-August 5; France: July 4-July 25, July 18-August 1; Britain: July 10-July 24, July 10-August 1, July 24-August 7. For details, e-mail: info@hkilanguages.com or tel: 2877 6160.

Outward Bound in Sai Kung runs a variety of five-day camps for students from July 6 until the end of August. Summer 4 Kids is aimed at eight- to 10-year-olds and offers activities from painting outdoors to catching fish by the seaside. It is designed to foster a love of the outdoors while teaching problem solving and independence. Team Explorer is for 11- to 13-year-olds and focuses on more vigorous activities such as rock climbing, kayaking and hiking. The aim is to develop an active curiosity, a love of trying new things and interest in the environment and nature.

Contact: www.outwardbound.org.hk or tel: 2792 4333

SuperCamp Hong Kong files in professional teachers from the US specially for its programmes. Junior Forum (ages 10-12), July 25-31, is a seven-day residential programme that aims to help students to learn more about themselves and prepare for their transition to secondary school. Senior Forum (ages 13-14), July 13-22, is a 10-day residential programme designed to help students discover their unique abilities and develop confidence as they are given strategies to prepare them for success in school and life. Senior Forum-Leadership Team (ages 15-17), July 13-22, gives students the opportunity to enhance leadership, interpersonal and self-management skills. SuperCamp Hong Kong is run by Pro-Active Learning. For details, e-mail: pal@proactive-learning.com or tel: 2736 9898

Focus On Film Youngsters aged 11 to 18 can learn the basics of filmmaking at the non-profit Kwun Tong studio before they act, edit, direct and produce their own shorts in five-day camps taught by film school graduates. Camps are from August 17-21 and August 24-28. E-mail: info@focusonfilmhk.com, visit www.focusonfilmhk.com or call 2987 6656

www.summercamps.com This site links US camps with students. Among the providers is SuperCamp US, which is billed as a highly engaging seven-10 day experience where students gain inspiration, confidence and knowledge by living on a university campus such as Stanford, Brown or Wake Forest. Susan Schwartz familypost@scmp.com



Learning teamwork and trust is all part of the experience at SuperCamp in Hong Kong.

In the age of Facebook and Twitter, many children would rather make new friends in cyberspace than at a camp, especially during long summer breaks. But Hong Kong's internet generation is beginning to take to the idea – with nudging from their parents. There's more to camps these days than tackling an obstacle course and storytelling around a fire; the most popular ones are designed to broaden minds, build character and nurture self-reliance.

It was certainly excellent practice for boarding school, says Lung Kit-may, who sent two of her children to SuperCamp in Hong Kong. Her son Brendan, who is now in boarding school in Britain, went about five years ago when he was 10, and daughter Gabrielle attended when she was nine.

"Because it is residential, I felt it was a good experience where they could learn to be independent," Lung says. "Yet they weren't so far away that we were out of reach if they needed us."

It was the first time away from home for both children, but apparently too much was going on for them to miss mum and dad. "They came back more confident and more open," Lung says.

Such thinking has contributed to an increase in children from Hong Kong being signed up for camps. The Hong Kong Institute of Languages reports numbers rising for its camps in Europe, Canada and the mainland. SuperCamp, which runs activities around the world including Hong Kong, also notes that 28 youngsters signed up for its programmes in the United States last year, compared with just one in 2000.

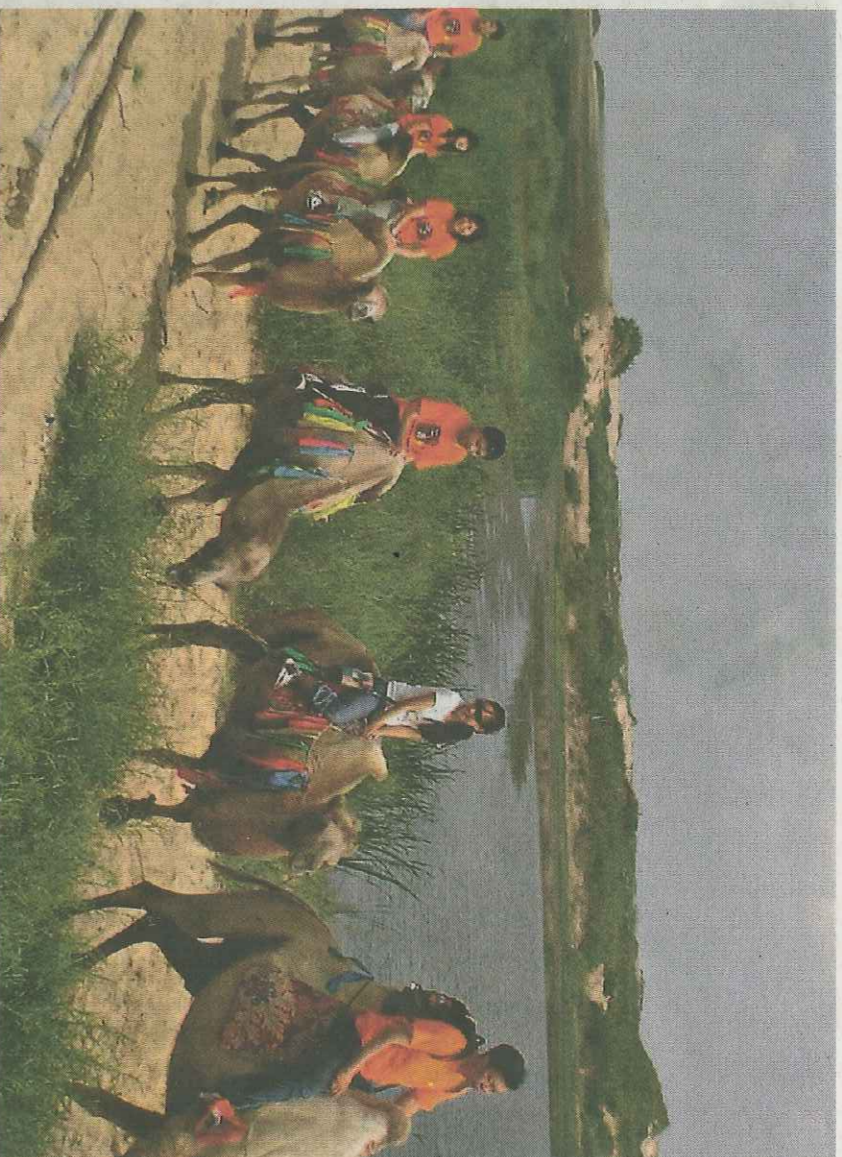
One reason for the rising popularity is that "parents want their children to develop thinking skills – the ability to think for themselves," says Bobbi DePorter, co-founder and president of SuperCamp. "At our camps they learn how to learn. Most kids say: 'Why hasn't anyone taught this to me before?'"

"One of the Hong Kong students remarked that he felt his school was very traditional, where the most important quality was to have all of the answers instead of valuing and questioning various topics. He was so happy that it was OK and, in fact, was welcome to query things at the camp."

Teenagers often resist the idea, though, preferring to stay by their computers at home and keep up with friends and trends on social networks.

"They think they're too cool for camp," says Yolanda Yeh, who runs SuperCamp at St Stephen's College in Stanley.

A pair of 14-year-old twins who joined the camp a few years ago clearly felt that way. "Their parents informed us they were reluctant to come and that there could be problems. They turned up with their hands crossed over their chests and were quite obnoxious," Yeh recalls. "But at the end of the 10 days, their father thanked me so much; he was pleased that he had really noticed a difference in his kids."



Children ride camels, learn calligraphy and make food at the Hong Kong Institute of Languages' Beijing summer camp.



Lai Bo-hon signed up his 12-year-old daughter, Natalie, for Outward Bound's Team Explorer programme over Easter to encourage her to open up.

"I enrolled my daughter because her teacher told us that she's not very good at teamwork and not very good at interacting with other people. So I thought the programme might help her," he says. "She wasn't scared as I briefed her beforehand about what to expect, and she was keen to try."

While Natalie enjoyed the activities, particularly kayaking and land expeditions, her father reckons she is just starting to open up. It'll take time, he says: "We just need to keep giving her some reminders."

In tandem with China's rapid ascent over the past two decades, organisers report growing interest in camps held on the mainland that help give participants a better understanding of the society and culture.

"When we first started in 1992, there was hardly anyone offering summer camps," says Dominique Chasset, director of the Hong Kong Institute of Languages. "At the time, most of the children were going to Europe and a small number to Canada, but now we have 50 per cent going to China and the remainder to Europe."

The institute's Beijing summer camp features three hours of language classes in the mornings, focusing on listening and speaking skills, and reading and writing. Each child is also partnered with a Chinese student, who will spend an hour with them discussing everyday

topics and answering questions on homework.

Youngsters are introduced to calligraphy, kung fu and opera and other Chinese arts during the three-week camp, which culminates with a performance of a Chinese opera they have learned, but the highlight is perhaps a five-day trip to Inner Mongolia, where children can go horse or camel riding and sleep in a yurt. The routine is similar for other countries.

Chasset, who joined a group on their Mongolian jaunt, says the youngsters' response was a revelation. "The children were asked to wake up at 4.30am to watch the sun rise. They all said it was an opportunity of a lifetime, and they didn't want to miss it. But I was still so surprised to see they all woke up without any complaints despite the early hour and the freezing cold."

Younger participants have a great capacity to enjoy themselves and adapt to being away from home, Chasset says.

"It is usually the parents who miss their children, and we have to ask them not to call too many times



At our camps they learn how to learn. Most kids say: 'Why hasn't anyone taught this to me before?'

BOBBI DEPORTER, SUPERCAMP CO-FOUNDER

as they will make the children homesick," she says. "They need time to integrate into their new home. Sometimes the first night might be difficult, but this generally passes."

Selecting an experienced camp organiser is crucial, as Frances Leung learned. A camp organised by a fellow parent at her son's international school four years ago fell far below expectations, she says.

Leung accompanied her son, then nine, to the camp held at a Beijing university campus and found the conditions hard to endure. "We all had quite a difficult time adapting to the hygienic conditions. There was no proper toilet, and it was so dirty that the students wore sneakers to take a shower."

Although her son improved his language skills, picking up more of the local slang and culture, Leung reckons the two-week programme lacked imagination.

"For instance, they covered Chinese calligraphy, but they didn't present it in an interesting way."

That's why Leung has taken her son to SuperCamp programmes in the US for the past two years. "Our experience with SuperCamp was quite different: it's a very good programme and very interesting. My son learned a lot in terms of values and how to interact with people. It also helped his English, and he's changed in terms of improved grades and study techniques. In fact, he cried at the graduation ceremonies because he didn't want to go home and miss the friends he'd made." familypost@scmp.com

PATHWAYS

When bats, monkeys and pigs are all in a day's work

Zuleika Sedgley familypost@scmp.com

Name Shek Chung-tong
Job Wetland and fauna conservation officer

Where did you go to school? I went to the Lee Yao Memorial Secondary School in Kwai Tsing. My favourite subjects were biology, music and mathematics.

What events in your childhood influenced your choice of career?

When I was in primary school we used to picnic in Kam Shan Country Park. I remember one day a monkey came and stole our food. It was my first experience with a wild mammal in Hong Kong. I used to watch David Attenborough documentaries on the origin of life and they made me want to serve the environment.

Where did you go to university and what did you read? I went to the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. I did a bachelors degree in biology and a masters in marine biology.

When did you decide you wanted to be a government conservation officer?

After my masters, I worked in a commercial laboratory in Australia. I decided that I wanted to work for the Agricultural, Fisheries and Conservation Department instead because they do a lot a field work. I did not want to be stuck in an office all the time. A few years ago we conducted a survey of mammals in Hong Kong, where we set up nets to catch bats and found four new species in Hong Kong. There is still so much information we don't know about our environment.

What does the job involve? I specialise in the conservation of mammals, especially wild pigs.

monkeys and bats. The other day I released two monkeys which had been causing a nuisance to residents. It makes me happy to see them go back to the environment. I am also involved in environmental management of the country parks and special areas, ecological aspects of environmental impact assessment studies, and ecological surveys and research. The mammal survey was the biggest project I have worked on.

Is conservation a good career option for Hong Kong students today? Yes, conservation is an industry and it is getting bigger. We need more young people to help improve our environment and protect our future. You may not make a lot of money but it is a very satisfying job.

What has been is your biggest professional achievement?

Publishing my book, *A Field Guide to the Terrestrial Mammals of Hong Kong* in 2006. It involved four years' field work and two years' preparation.

How do you update your skills and knowledge? It is important to get actual experience through field work. I also go overseas to participate in conferences. I went to Japan for a primate conference and I really learned a lot.

The entry requirements for the job are a first or second-class honours degree in applied or natural science.

Either three years post-graduate experience in a related field or a higher degree or post-graduate diploma in applied or natural science is also required. Candidates also have to pass the language papers, Basic Law assessment and an aptitude test for the civil service Common Recruitment Examination. Candidates must have HKCEE passes in English and Chinese.



Shek Chung-tong specialises in mammal conservation. Photo: Felix Wong