

# China in your hands

Go beneath the surface and travel like a pro



By Christine Surlien

[www.ChinaScratched.com](http://www.ChinaScratched.com)

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## China

The People's Republic of China is big, crowded and highly fascinating. From historical sights to modern inventions, China will excite, amaze and overwhelm you. With its diverse population of over 1.3 billion people, China may irritate and annoy you a bit on the way. They send people to space, but cannot walk through a subway door in an orderly manner. China has the second largest economy in the world, but its leaders still call it a developing country. It's a country full of contradictions and contrasts.

The number one rule to understanding China is that there is not only one truth to explain its many customs and mysteries. Be skeptical if you hear someone say, "This is what China is like." Such generalizations do not work in a country this big and diverse. It doesn't mean that you should be skeptical of everything you read. Just keep in mind that there are many, many versions of the truth out there. Next rule: Never take no for an answer! The Chinese tend to

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answer your questions very literary, and seldom offer any extra information. So if you really want something, you just have to continue asking with a slight variation until you get your desired answer. Actually, I have it as a rule of thumb to always ask at least three Chinese the same question. This way I get some alternatives and see which answer most agree on. A very useful tactic when asking for directions.

My final advice is to be open and curious. Yes, things are different than from home, and no, I don't know why they do it the way they do. Instead of fighting it, you will have a lot more fun just going along with it. The better prepared you are, the more you'll get back, so happy reading.

## Before departure

### Passport

Before even thinking about a visa, check your passport. Chinese visa rules require the passport to be valid for at least six months after your entry to China. Normally there are no exceptions. So if your passport will expire within six months after your inbound ticket, get a new one now. Also, you need at least two blank pages in your passport for the visa. If you are a world-traveling vagabond, check to see how your passport is looking.

### Visa

Most people need a visa to enter China. And since every country has their own rules towards Chinese citizens, Chinese embassies will have different rules in different countries. Check the Chinese embassy's homepage in your country. Here you will find general information, forms to fill out and prices. Most likely you'll apply for tourist visa that gives you 30 - 90 days, valid three months from date of issue.

The visa will be glued to a page in your passport, meaning you will need to send it to them. Expect up to three weeks for shipping and handling, unless you pay more for express service and shipping. And remember, if you haven't filled in the form correctly, they'll send everything

back and you have to start all over again. So fill in all the boxes in the form, attach an original passport photo in the correct size and send it with the fee and return postage.

The application form will ask a lot of questions, including your destination in China. Know that they will never actually check this, so you don't have to stick to what you write here. Be aware that by writing Tibet or Xinjiang you will get their attention and they'll question your motives for visiting, so you might want to omit this on your application. Same if you were to write under occupation journalist, researcher, writer or something within the religious sphere.

There are special visas for students, business, journalists, crew and transit. See your local embassy's homepage for more information. Normally, these visas need special invitation from a host organization in China.



You cannot get a visa at the border. If you arrive in China without one, you will be sent back on next available flight. That is if you are allowed on the flight to China. Since the airlines have to cover the cost of sending you home, your first visa control will probably be at check in.

Never overstay your visa. Doing so will cause you a great deal of hassle and you will incur a fine when trying to depart China. If you want to stay longer than the 30 days given, find a Public

Security Bureau with a Foreign Affairs section. How much time and money it will cost varies, but normally it shouldn't be a problem to get 30 additional days. You can then extend one more time, if your original visa gives you 90 days.

Find information about the Chinese embassy in your country here: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zwjg/2490/>

## Vaccines

Time to find your vaccine card, wherever that might be! There are no required vaccinations, but check your card against the recommended list from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. See their page on China here: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/china.htm#notices>

Talk to your doctor or contact a travel vaccine clinic if you have questions or concerns.



## Travel Insurance

I take it for granted that comprehensive travel insurance is on your list of things to get before departure. Remember to check that it covers your entire stay. If you are you traveling to Tibet, you might need special insurance; depending on how high of an altitude you are aiming for. And if you insist on swimming outside the shark nets in Hong Kong, at least read the advice!

## Packing

Passport with visa and tickets are ready, now you only need to figure out what to pack. Obviously the season, your destinations in China and the nature of your stay will determine that, but here are some guidelines.

## The Essentials

Passport with visa, travel insurance documents, credit card, name of hotel in Chinese characters, camera and your common sense and clear head.

## Clothes

While some claim they never pack more than a set of underwear and then plan to shop for whatever else they need, this is not a strategy I'll recommend. Especially if you are on the taller or bigger side. Or if you are female and don't want your self confidence shattered. If medium is what you normally wear, then prepare for XXL. Same for shoes. Finding the right size in a decent quality can be hard, even if you are not Mr. or Mrs. Bigfoot. Don't want to get into how many times I have felt like one of Cinderella's stepsisters, forcing my feet into the shop's biggest size, which obviously wasn't meant for me.

So basically pack your easy-care, fit for traveling clothes. Most hotels have a cleaning service, so don't worry about running out of clean underpants. And chances are you will find something to buy. I promise!

There is no particular dress code in China. You can pretty much wear whatever you want. Like a plastic bag on your head when it's raining. Learn from the locals. If religious spots like

temples, mosques and other holy places are on your itinerary (good chance they are), you should wear clothing that covers your shoulders and at least goes to your knees. Normally it's only the western bars at the international hotels that might require formal wear.

Comfortable walking shoes are a must. The sights you are going to cover huge areas, and often the cars and busses getting you there will park far away from the entrance. Bring those boots that were meant for walking.

## Electrical things

Electricity in China runs on 220V / 50Hz. Check if your electrical appliances need a transformer, most computers and mobile phones can run on both 110V and 220V. The Chinese use three sets of plugs, so they might fit your charger. Just in case bring an adaptor. Most hotel rooms will have blow dryers, so no need to bring that.

## Practical things

In China's big cities you can more or less buy everything you need, especially if you find a Watson's. That being said, who want to spend their time looking for a band-aid or lip balm when there are so many other fun things to do? I therefore suggest to pack a few useful things, like sunscreen, first aid kit (band-aid, painkillers, diarrhea medicine, eye drops), a pocket knife, lip balm, sunglasses, umbrella, sun hat, packages of Kleenex that will be useful for the toilets that don't have paper and antibacterial wipes that will be useful for all the washrooms that don't have hot water or any water at all.

## Food

Beijing and Shanghai have plenty of shops that sell American peanut butter, Italian wine, French cheese, Belgian beer and so on. However, instead of spending your limited time looking for them and your hard earned money buying it, you can make it easy for your self by packing instant coffee, your favorite tea bags, instant oatmeal and peanut butter in case breakfast is a little bit too much on the Chinese side. Breakfast is, after all, the most important meal of the day. For everything else, you are in China - eat the local food! Except for chocolate, I cannot recommend Chinese chocolate or other candy. It is just too weird.

## A good book

While the number of foreign books are expanding and good bookshops are easier to come by than before, they are hard to locate, and the hotel shop might only have a limited number of interesting titles. Chinese airports seldom have international titles in English. Don't expect to be entertained from your hotel TV. If you are lucky, the hotel will have CNN, BBC and HBO along with a large selection



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of Chinese channels. Trust me, after a couple of days you can do without.

Finally, you need to pack patience, an open mind and a big dose of humor. With this, your trip will be successful and enjoyable.

## Arrival in China

The international airports in China are probably a lot more modern and nicer than the one you departed from. With inbound and outbound tourism exploding in recent years, new airports and terminals are built with record speed, and are as modern as they get. The procedure to enter China is not that different than from any other place. Remember your belongings, like the passport you might have left in the seat pocket in front of you after filling out the entry forms. Depart from the plane, walk the endless corridors and arrive at immigration control. If you have filled out your form correctly, you get your passport stamped and then follow the signs to your baggage. The entry form is basically your name, passport number, flight number, address in China (hotel name will do) and similar questions. If it's not correct, you fill it out again. On the other side, your luggage will arrive and then you will walk under the green sign to arrival hall, where a Starbucks awaits you.



### Money

If you haven't exchanged money before, now is the time. Find an ATM or an exchange counter, and you are set to go. Due to the high amount of counterfeit money, the highest value on a note is only 100 *yuan* (about \$16). You will feel like a millionaire when you can't close your wallet with all the money inside. Consider a money belt or something similar, since long fingered pickpockets will think you actually are one.

The name of the currency is RMB, short for *renminbi*, which means the People's Currency. The money is called *yuan*, and come in notes of 100, 50, 20, 10, 5 and 1. Some places use 1



*yuan* coins, and then you have the *jiao* coins. One *jiao* is a tenth of a *yuan*, and come in 5, 2 and 1 coins. You might get the old *jiao* notes, that are smaller, but have the same colors as their big brother *yuan* notes. Don't worry, if you try to pay 50 *yuan* with a 5 *jiao* note, the seller will let you know. When exchanging money you might get some *fen* coins, that you will not be able to spend anywhere on your trip. 1 *fen* is 1/100 of a *yuan*, but is seldom in use. I like the old 1 *fen* notes, they were the size of a big stamp, made of yellow paper and

had a picture of a tractor.

This sounds too easy? The money might officially be called *yuan* and *jiao*, but orally they are known as *kuai* and *mao*. ¥ 3.40 will be called 3 *kuai* and 4 *mao*. Sometimes they won't even say the price, just show you their fingers. They are not being rude, only using the Chinese number gestures. Google it, study the pictures and you can be just like the locals.

## Getting to your hotel

You can book transfer from tour companies, car companies or your hotel, and be met at arrival by a driver with your name on a poster. Swiftly you are taken to a waiting car, and off you go to your designated hotel. Some hotels stand out from the crowd by offering transport by a Maserati. Even if it's just a regular prepaid transfer service, it can be a truly luxurious feeling. Taking a taxi will not give you a particularly luxurious feeling, but is a lot cheaper.

Please follow the signs to the taxi line, and don't be fooled by the guys hanging around in the arrival hall. Their fares are up to ten times more than a regular fare, without any benefits. The line for taxis can be long, but moves constantly, as new taxis pull up. Personnel at the site will help you with the address to your destination. Please have Chinese cash ready, you cannot pay with a credit card.

Beijing has busses and an airport train, but unless you are living very close to the stops, the hassle of getting out of the station and finding a taxi that can take you to your destination is normally not worth it. Normally a taxi into town will cost around 100 *yuan*.



If you land at Pudong International Airport in Shanghai, you might want to consider taking the train towards the city, if only to say that you have traveled 400 km / h on ground. The ride takes just 8 minutes, and the final stop is still a way from downtown, but getting taxis here is easy.

Hong Kong has a great train, with convenient stops along the way. Worth trying if you know where your hotel is located.

## Mobile and networks

Having a smartphone in China is great, with maps, translation and dictionary apps and all the other stuff you need on a daily basis. Before you travel, check with your operator the costs of using your phone in China, so that you don't get any nasty surprises when you get your bill. If you have a regular cell phone or an unlocked smart phone, it can be a good idea to get a Chinese prepaid SIM-card. You can buy them at the airport, newspaper stands around town and in mobile phone shops.

In China, most cafes have free wifi, and hotels will have some sort of internet connection. The biggest problem is not getting online, but getting around the Chinese Firewall. The Chinese government is practicing strict censorship, and Facebook, Youtube and Twitter are some of the sites not accessible on the mainland. If you search for Tibet, Xinjiang, Dalai Lama and other political topics you will not get any results. To avoid this, you need to access the web via a VPN account. There are plenty of information about this on the internet.

# Getting around in the cities

## Taxi

If you don't speak Chinese and are not too comfortable around, or rather surrounded by, big groups of people; taxis are your best way to get from point A to point B. Always cheap, the quality of the car is more than decent in the big cities, and okay in smaller ones. Go for the obvious taxis, with a meter and the price of the fare on a window sticker. The starting price will last a couple of kilometers, and then the meter starts running, with the price stated on the sticker, like rmb 2/km. Always remember your receipt because it has the taxi license number on it. Believe it or not, cameras, wallets and mobile phones have found their lost owners,

thanks to the ability to track down taxis with honest drivers. Beijing has around 60,000 taxis driving around, so remembering that the car was yellow and red and the taxi driver drank tea, will not be enough to track it down. Inside the taxi, a license sign with a picture of the driver is easily visible.

Some general rules apply wherever you are: Don't

assume the driver will know any English. Don't assume the driver will know how to read a map, even if it is in Chinese. Don't assume the driver will know the way. Still, there is no need to worry. Bring the address of where you are going in Chinese. The hotels have address cards, often with the big attractions printed on them as well. If you don't have the address written down, go to an upscale



hotel and hail the taxi from there. The doorman will explain to the driver where to take you. Still no luck, find a crowded bus stop and ask if anyone speaks English and get him or her to explain to the driver. In worst cases, the driver will stop another taxi and ask you to take that one instead. See, it always works out one way or another.

The drivers might not speak English or know how to get to your destination, but they are creative and will always find a way. And if the driver knowingly or unknowingly takes you on a detour, you have a couple of choices. Get really angry, scream and yell and force the taxi to stop so you can get out, and then wait for a new taxi that hopefully will take you directly there. Or you can consider it as extra low-cost sightseeing, taking in the never boring street life of China. I promise you, the traffic and roads, modern skyscrapers and old temples, people in their fancy cars or rickety old bikes will entertain you.

## Subway

Larger cities have modern subways that are cheap and especially convenient when traffic is jammed above ground. The only problem is that when the roads are jammed during rush hour, there is also rush hour at the subway. Unless you don't mind extremely loud noise and incredibly close crowds, you might prefer the slow solitude in a taxi. Still, subways are a great

alternative. You know where they are going, and the signs and announcements are in English. The only thing that can happen is that you take it the wrong way, and then you just get off and cross the platform. One thing you'll notice is that Chinese people will not wait to let people out before they try to get onto the train. The result is a jam in front of every door. Simply pretend you are swimming. Keep your elbows at a good angle, slightly bent outwards, lean forward and dive in there. Actually getting a seat will be like winning the Olympics. In the beginning you should be satisfied if you get in before the doors close. To get out, you might miss a stop or two the first few times.

## **Bus**

The signs at the bus stop will list all the stops on the line, but only in Chinese. So this is a tricky option. Still, it can be a fun experience to jump on a random bus, the ticket costs next to nothing and it will take you places you would never have found otherwise. When you decide to get off, you can take a taxi back.

## **Bike**

Most hotels will rent out bikes, and most cities have bicycle lanes along every road. I will not recommend it on your first days. Please spend some time in the traffic figuring out the flow and rules, or rather the lack of rules. The hierarchy on the roads is simple - the bigger the vehicle, the less it feels like stopping for smaller ones. That puts bikes just above pedestrians. Funny thing is that the local bikers don't seem to get this. Their cycling is often reckless, and unfortunately there are plenty of accidents. Sometimes it's their fault, sometimes the driver's fault. I love cycling in China. You see, hear and smell so much more than when you drive, and it's a lot more effective than walking. Just be careful.

## **Feet**

Some cities are nicer than others, and can be enjoyed by foot. The old, historical areas in Shanghai are great for strolls, likewise Beijing. Never underestimate the distances though. What seems short on a map, can take hours. Also, the big roads are not particularly pleasant to trot along and the traffic can be suffocating. Conclusion: plan your walks, and take a taxi to and back.

# Get the most out of your trip

When arriving in Beijing, Shanghai or Hong Kong try to get copies of some of the free weekly and monthly magazines in English. They list good restaurants, bars, nightclubs, concerts, special happenings and information on new shops and the like. They can be found in most hotel lobbies and in bars and restaurants frequented by foreigners. You can also find them

online, see <http://www.thebeijinger.com>, <http://www.cityweekend.com.cn/>, <http://www.timeout.com> and search for your city on <http://hk.asia-city.com>.

## Sightseeing

Obviously you come to China to look at things. Temples, palaces, walls, museums, archaeological sites, natural wonders - the list goes on. Unesco's World Heritage has 41 sites on their list for China, places of special cultural importance. In addition, every small village or town will have something they want to show you.

For a country that started with international tourism a few decades ago, they've come a long way.

Some will say they have come too far.

Take the Shaolin temple, home of the kung fu fighting warrior monks. For centuries they lived, studied Buddhism and practiced their own form of kung fu in a remote village, surrounded by calm forests. Well, these forests are not calm anymore. Swamped by Chinese and foreign tourists with cameras, everyone wants to get a piece of the action. The tour busses have to park miles away, and then you take special shuttle busses to the temple, and to the mandatory kung fu show. The head monk is no longer called the abbot, but rather the CEO of the Shaolin Temple.



But what can you do? Chinese people now have the money and means to travel in their own country, and there are a lot of them. They prefer to travel in groups and are highly recognizable with their travel company's caps in bright colors. They are often led by a guide, yelling into a small megaphone to get everyone's attention. It kind of shatters the peace and calm you expect in a thousand year old temple. In China, you never walk alone.

Every sight has the same layout. First you need to locate the ticket booth, normally a good distance from the entrance. Some sights have one basic entry ticket, and then you have to pay extra to get into the highlights. Normally it's best to buy a full ticket at the start, why not see everything when you are there? Just remember in which pocket you put it; you'll have to show it several times inside. But don't worry; you can buy tickets for the special sights inside also. Be aware that at many sights it makes sense to exit from another gate than the one you entered. If you have a driver waiting, make sure you know where to meet. Many sights have the parking lot far away from the actual entrance and exit.

What you'll find is that there are a lot of temples in China,



and they look very much alike. Like churches in Italy, you might want to skip a few on the way. Yes, they are pretty, probably have a very special feature you can only find here and have an amazing history, but after a while it feels like you have seen them all. You are on holiday, after all, no shame in wanting to relax. My favorite temples are the neglected ones, outside the main tourist trails. Dusty and faded, they feel more authentic. And they

are quiet.

When walking around the sights of China you will encounter thousands of local tourists that have never seen a foreigner before. I have never understood the novelty we hold, but don't be surprised if you suddenly become the main attraction. Photos will be taken, girls will giggle, and incomprehensible conversations will take place, with lots of laughter from their side. Especially if you are tall, have a good amount of body hair, are fat, short, pale, blond or a redhead. It can be highly annoying and tiresome, or it can be a lot of fun. And remember, if they take your picture, you can take theirs. Cute small babies with split pants, the weather worn faces of hard working farmers, lovely girls who have dressed up in their best clothes, far away from what count as regular fashion. I don't encourage smoking, but keeping a packet of western cigarettes will give you a lot of goodwill and new friends among the men. If they give you one back, do like the locals and put behind your ear and promise to smoke it later.

Every sight will have shops inside and outside. Inside, they are more expensive, but a lot less hassle than the eager vendors on the outside. Many sell from bags they carry around, and don't have a license to do so. They can be aggressive and hard to get rid off; best advice is to ignore them completely. It feels cruel, but if you start giving attention to everybody who stops you, you will soon be exhausted and find it hard to get out of the situation. The small shops and stalls are at least legal, but here it's also best to ignore the seller, quickly look at what's on offer and move on. If you find anything you like, bargain!

## Food

Where to start?! The best way to sum it up: It doesn't taste anything like the Chinese food you get at home! The variety is enormous. The selection of spices, sauces, vegetables, noodles, and parts of the animal they use...

Every region has their specialties and tastes. Northeast is known for clean tastes, and use mostly regular farm animals, like beef, pork and chicken. In the old days, rice was grown in the south, and expensive to bring to the north. So here, in the dry soil, they cultivated different types of grains. The staples are all sorts of noodles, dumplings, steamed and deep fried bread. Nowadays, you can get rice at every meal if you want to, but I would never miss a chance to get some freshly homemade noodles or steaming dumplings. In winter, you can buy a *long* of *baozi* from a whole in the wall; a bamboo basket of really warm buns filled with meat, that they put in a flimsy plastic bag. It keeps your fingers warm (and sticky) and makes you happy in both soul and stomach.



Food along the coast has more seafood and it tastes a lot better than the farmed inland fish you get other places. Shanghai food is known to be oily and sweet. Further south, the food gets weirder. Guangzhou is the craziest, with all sorts of bugs, kittens, creepy animals and whatnot that they eat. The Southwest has tropical food, and in the Northwest it gets spicy! Sichuan province has hundreds of different types of chilies, and in some dishes it feels they have put it all in at once. In Tibet you get lots of fat butter tea and yak meat, while Xinjiang has great food. So much closer to Central Asia than central China, you get great lamb, yogurt and the best oven baked bread. Inner Mongolia has lot of lamb, in every variation. If you don't have time to travel around, the big cities will have restaurants with food from all over China.

So you can still go on a culinary journey without leaving town.

### Will they serve me dog?

Yes, if you order it. I'm actually not sure how common it is at regular restaurants, but they do eat dog (and a whole lot of other animals) in China. Mostly in winter, as it's believed make your body warm. That said, you will never be served dog while on a group tour, or disguised as other meat.

### Street food

Very convenient, you'll find it as you walk along, and different sellers will cook up suitable meals for the time of the day. Breakfast can be pancakes with egg, spicy sauce and chives, sausages, twisted deep fried bread and hot soya milk. For lunch you can get baked sweet

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potato and cold noodles. In the evening portable kitchens arrive on street corners, where thrifty people can produce from the back of their bikes a variety of dishes. The food will be served on sticks, either fried in oil or barbequed, or served in bowls covered by a plastic bag to ensure a certain hygienic standard. If you don't mind living a little dangerously, you will find the food fresh and extremely cheap. On the three-wheeled bikes come not only a fully-equipped kitchen, but also foldable tables and the world's lowest stools that are set up at the street, so that you can sit down and enjoy your food right there. And you can bet your money that some guy will be selling beer close by. This is literally the most down to earth way to take a meal in China. Not for everybody, it is ok to pass, but if getting close to Chinese people is what you are after, stopping for a beer and a snack is a good start.

## Restaurants

Hole in the wall restaurants should not scare you even if the interior doesn't look too inviting. Chinese food philosophy is that the food should be in the center, not the decorations. The most basic restaurants will have convenient formica tables, uncomfortable chairs, florescent lighting and year old Christmas decorations. Floors will be sticky and the menus only in Chinese. Unfortunately, the best food you will ever eat is at places like this. So bring a list of dishes that sound nice, or look around at what others are eating and point at their plates. Sign language can work, but remember that they eat every piece on the pig, chicken and cow, so flapping your wings and going cluck cluck can just as well bring you chicken feet or throat. The worst that can happen is that it tastes like shit or the meat is unidentifiable, and then you just don't eat it. Dishes will cost around 2-3 dollars; it will not ruin you. And there's a specter of holes, pass the most dirty and sad, and go for the ones that fill up during the evening.

### Is the food safe?

Yes, mostly it is, at least China is no worse than other places. They seldom eat raw food, vegetables and meat are normally cut in small pieces and cooked over high temperatures. Never eat food that looks uncooked, and thoroughly clean fruit and vegetables you can't peel. Be extra cautious when the weather is hot and drink boiled or bottled water. Just in case, bring Imodium.

Most cities have a choice for those who don't want the basics or can splurge on luxury restaurants. These middle tier restaurants often have a good atmosphere, waitresses in cute uniforms and menus with pictures or in English. Many have a regional or historical theme. The food will be more expensive, but still cheap by Western standards.

China has hundreds of thousands of millionaires, and they all have to eat somewhere. Half the restaurants are so discreet you won't find them. The other half scream out to you in their vulgarity. These luxurious Chinese restaurants are not for the faint hearted. The décor is overwhelming with its fake baroque style and enormous chandeliers. Then it's the selection

on the menu and finally the price. Bird nests, shark fins, sea cucumbers and other rare animals don't come cheap. Not to mention the vintage French wines and XO cognac. This is where the rich go to entertain and impress each other, absolutely no reason for you to go there.

The variety of Chinese food is so great that you probably can try different dishes for the rest of your life and never get to try them all. However, there are other options. In the big international cities, you

will find great foreign restaurants. The posh and expensive ones are at the five star hotels, but there are others that are cheaper and equally as good. Get hold of one of the free English magazines that list them and their address. You can get great Korean, Japanese, Thai, Indian, and a decent hamburger. They also have Hooters. McDonalds, KFC and Starbucks are soon to be on every street corner.

Vegetarians have a hard time in China. Even if Buddhism has been around for centuries, and special vegetarian restaurants exist and are very popular, the average Chinese has no understanding for why anyone chooses not to eat meat. You can order delicious vegetables, and they serve tofu in a thousand different ways, but beware that they often put a little bit of meat even in dishes they say are vegetarian. Have it written on a note what you don't eat, and show it to the waitress. Same if you have any allergies.

## Drinks

With your food you will need something to drink. In the regular restaurants you will automatically get a pot of jasmine green tea on the table that will be filled up with hot water when you put the lid upside down to signal it is empty. Other options are soft drinks, normally Coke and Sprite, bottled water and of course beer! Chinese love their beers. Every city has their own brewery, and they all come in big, green glass bottles, have low alcohol

percentages and are light and easy to drink. Qingdao is the most famous and regarded as the best choice. Imported brews are available here and there. Wine in China has come a long way, but finding really good, locally produced wine can be hard. The high taxes on imported wine make it an expensive alternative. At one point during your trip you should try *baijiu*,

### Where are the springrolls and fortune cookies?

Springrolls are traditionally served in south China. Fortune cookies were invented in America around 1900, inspired by a traditional Japanese cookie. Attempts to import fortune cookies to China has failed, as the Chinese find them too American.

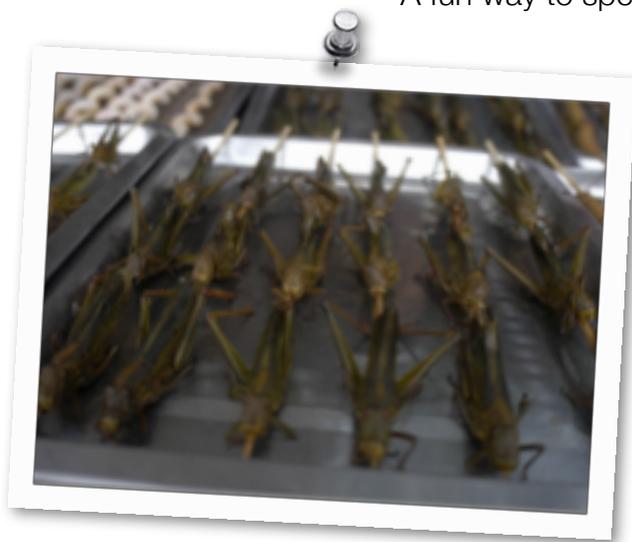
### Why is the beer warm?

Chinese people think it's unhealthy to drink cold in warm weather. That might be, we don't care. Learn to say *bing de* after you order your drinks, and you'll get it iced cold, as it should be.

a white liquor that is best drunk as shots. The cheapest costs from 2 *yuan* for a bottle. No worry, you will never get addicted to this stuff.

## Nightlife

The official China close around 9 pm. Dinner parties will end around this time, and most shops close. It seems people go to bed early so that they can get up and do their morning exercise at 6:00 am. Stay out and up, and you will see that China has cities that never sleep. Especially in the summer, people will hang outside with their neighbors, chatting and playing badminton, instead of being inside the hot apartments. In some cities whole families camp outside overnight on the curbs, in hopes of a cool night breeze.



A fun way to spend the evening is at night markets. A whole

street of food stalls, selling the weirdest food ever. Fried sea star on a stick? Scorpions or snakes? Silk worms? A good way to test how brave you really are. Tourists and locals alike have a good time here.

If this doesn't appeal to you, many regular restaurants are open 24/7 and will serve you full Chinese dinners throughout night. Workers coming off shifts, friends returning from a party, lovers having spent the evening singing love duets at the karaoke place will keep you company when you come in to fill up your

stomach after a big night out on the town.

Going out Chinese style, karaoke is a must. Chinese people just love to sing, and it doesn't matter if they don't have the voice for it. The Chinese way of doing it is to go to the karaoke house, a beehive of small rooms equipped with big screen TV and microphones. You can order drinks and snacks, and then let the singing begin. English songs might be limited in number, but who gets tired of Eye of the Tiger? Here you will only socialize with your group, so finding a local bar or nightclub might be more fun, if meeting locals is what you are after.

Try to get hold of one of the English magazines early in your trip and see if you can find anything that tickles your interest. Beijing is known for underground punk and rock concerts; Shanghai is more techno and djs. The concert halls are hosts to domestic and international superstars. Rooftop bars are wonderful in summertime. Unless you have a lot of money to burn, stay away from the Chinese style nightclubs. The prices can be extremely high, and the style and atmosphere very unfamiliar.

## Shopping

You either love it or hate it. In China it is impossible to avoid it. It's just everywhere. After all, China is the factory of the world. Many of the items produced in China for overseas customers (read high quality), never end up on the Chinese market, though. Instead, it is flooded with all this cheap stuff that for some reason seems so necessary and useful when you are there.



If you love shopping, the choices are many. Numerous malls have all the international brands, from the extremely luxurious to cheaper shops. The prices will be like home, more or less. Domestic malls and department stores have a more local appeal. Prices are cheaper, but so is the quality. The colors and fit might also feel a little bit foreign. Then you have the markets. In Beijing it's particularly Silk market, Yashow and Pearl market that are most famous. Or infamous. The goods they sell are

of questionable origin and quality. Silk market doesn't sell much pure silk, and while the Pearl Market has a trillion pearls for sale, it also has all the other objects that you find on the other markets. Which is shoes and bags, clothes, tailors and scarves, jewelry, electronic goods and souvenirs. It's here you find the knock offs, or the copied stuff, as they like to call it. Products made to look like the original one, using brands and logos in a very free spirited way.

Here are a few rules you must follow:

Always bargain! Sometimes you need to start at ten percent of the opening bid.

They see you are a newbie, and the sellers here are so clever. They know how to play you and get most of your money. It is a game that you probably will lose. If you bargain well enough you can

both feel like winners, though. Start as low as possible, and walk away if the seller is not going down. You'll find the same products in many of the other stalls. It's easier to get the price down if you buy multiple items. Hear what other people are paying and basically be as cheap as possible, you are not insulting them, even when they tell you that you are. They will never sell with a loss, and even though they are crying when agreeing on the price, they will welcome you back.

### What does Huanying Guanlin mean?

You walk into a shop, and all 16 salespersons yell this at the same time, at you. Don't get scared, they are only welcoming you to the store.

A note on fake goods: When buying them no money will benefit the designers or producers of the original product. Instead you encourage an illegal industry, with few regulations and no control over work safety and worker's rights. Your money will only benefit the back men, who probably have other shady businesses running. Many governments will give strict fines for bringing fake goods into their countries.

### How much is one dollar?

Haven't figured that one out, yet. The sellers shout it out to get your attention, prepare to pay more.

If you hate shopping, you will probably not be converted now. Not if you are forced into the markets. Not only do you need to bargain for everything you want to buy, but the heat, noise and all the people will probably have you running out screaming after a while. That being said, I

have witnessed die-hard anti-shoppers who by the end of the day have the fullest bags. How? The competition of getting the best price! This happens normally in travel groups, where dinner conversation often is about the day's purchases. Luckily there are other places to spend your money.

### Fun places to shop

**Neighborhood vegetable markets.** You don't need to buy anything. Just looking at the variety of greens, hearing the prices being called out, seeing the sellers taking their nap between the peak hours and smelling the spices is a great experience with a lot of photo opportunities.

**Museum shops.** Good books, beautiful reprints, copies of historic jewelry and porcelain, postcards and souvenirs of generally good quality. And fixed prices, no need to bargain.

**Antique markets.** Normally held on the weekends or in special streets, it can be fun looking at the old stuff that's for sale. Bargain hard, and please keep in mind that a lot of the stuff is made in antique factories all over the country. Made to look old, and sold for a high price. If you want to buy real antiques, please be sure you know what you are after or go to trusted shops. If you don't mind so much, you can get great copies of dancing Tang dynasty ladies, Ming dynasty vases and Qing dynasty bowls. Just don't pay more than it is actually worth (not much!).

**Ad hoc street shops.** Maybe it's only me, but I love weird, crazy things and luckily for me, the country is overflowing with it. One good source is what old ladies sell at tourist spots to earn a little extra to their pension. Think crocheted elephants in bright pink, animals made by grass straws, baby shoes, and traditional style pillows in forms of tigers and dragons. Unique, hand made souvenirs where the money goes straight to the maker.



**Small designer shops.** Often found in the art districts, these shops are proof that China is not only a copy machine. Cool clothes, prints, jewelry, bags and knick knacks.

**The markets for jewelry.** Unless you need a gift for your mother or girlfriend, this is for the girls. The markets have a huge selection of pearls, in every color, size, price, style and material. You can buy ready made, but it's a lot more fun to design your own. You buy pearls by the yard, and have them make the length and style you want. You can choose different locks and mix all sorts of materials to make your unique piece. Just bargain like a hero, and pay close attention so that you get it just like you want it.

## What do I need to know?

### Do the Chinese speak English?

Yes, they do. Many Chinese speak excellent English, not always so easy to understand, but they have a general knowledge and can carry a conversation easily enough. Problem is that they seldom work where you need them. They don't drive taxis or work at restaurants. They don't work in the small kiosk where it would be nice to ask for directions. Learning some simple sentences in Chinese, or at least the pronunciation of your hotel, directions and dishes is of a great help. Chinese people get really happy when they hear a foreigner making an effort to learn some Chinese. They will laugh at you, but not in a bad way. Just repeat after them a couple of times, and you will soon get it.

## How do I find a restroom?

Toilets are everywhere in China, ranging from ones built over the pig den, to the six star hotel version with staff. As a foreigner you can walk into any fancy hotel or restaurant and ask to use the restrooms. That can be a good idea if you have trouble with holes in the ground, toilets without water, walls or doors, but plenty of smell, since this categorize most of the public restrooms. Always carry toilet paper and wet wipes for hand cleaning with you.

## Why do they spit?

Many Chinese believe it's unhealthy to swallow what your body coughs up. So they spit it out, and makes it unhealthy for everyone. Often it's not the actual spitting that is worst, but the sounds leading up to it.



## Will I be bothered by sigarette smoking?

Probably, yes. In the big cities and among the educated, smoking is less common than in the rest of the contry. Some laws about smoking in public places excist, but most restaurants and hotels allow smoking indoors. However, many coffe shops, cafes and fast food chains are non smoking. Hotels have non-smoking rooms, but often the only difference is that they don't have an ashtray, and earlier customers have not respected the

sign on the door. Luckily, they are now stricter on smkoking on trains and busses than before. On the new bullet trains, smoking actually force the train to stop. This have caused some delays, but they are starting to figure it out now.

## Why the honking?

Chinese drivers mostly use the horn to signal that they are right behind you. Nothing aggressive, just a very loud "here I am". It takes a while to get used to, and hopefully you don't have a weak heart. When they honk because they are pissed off, you will know.

## What is the scariest thing I'll experience?

The only thing I seriously warn people about in China is the traffic. It is very chaotic. Drivers and bikers coming in every direction, never mind stop signs and red lights. The best way to cross a street is to get in the middle of a group and walk with them. Luckily, it doesn't take a long time for a group to emerge at a crossover. Never assume a car will stop for you, even if you have a green light. So be careful!

It might look like madness, but since everybody has the same disregard for rules, driving around is not as bad as it sounds. In cities the speed is so slow that car crashes seldom are serious (unless bikers or pedestrians are involved). Outside the big towns it's a little crazier, and I always suggest using your seatbelt. Tell the driver if you think he's going too fast, after all, you are the one paying.

## No crime?

China is a relatively safe country to travel in, at least in regard to crime against foreigners. As with everywhere, you keep your valuables somewhere safe, and don't let your wallet stick up from your back pocket. And please leave your passport in the hotel safe. It's such a hassle to get a new one, and you'll need a new visa in order to leave the country. Keep a photocopy of the information page and the visa with you, that will be good enough should anything happen.

And have the numbers to your bank somewhere if your credit card gets stolen.



Should you find your wallet gone, find the nearest police station and report it. The report will help you get a refund from your travel insurance. If the police officers can't speak English, ask if the hotel can help to locate a police station with a Foreign Affairs office.

Never get involved in fights, no matter how much you want to help out. Never.

While most Chinese are honest and would never imagine taking advantage of you, there are always some rotten eggs in the basket. One way to trick foreigners is when young people stop foreigners (for some reason they often say they are art students), and ask if they want to come to a teahouse and talk, so that they can practice their English. Tea will be served, and after a while the young people excuse themselves, and the tourist is left with an unreasonable high bill that many feel threatened to pay.

Never exchange money on the street. The exchange rates they give you are too good to be true. You hand over the money, they suddenly tell you higher rate, and when you insist on getting your money back, they will give you a folded note of a lot lesser value. Before you notice what happened, they are gone. Or if you get Chinese money, they will probably be counterfeit notes that will be refused by banks and shops.

Prostitution is illegal, but very common. To catch the attention of foreigners they normally hang out in the hotel bar or lobby or work in the nearby massage parlors. Often they will even call your room at night, not minding your wife next to you. Please tell the hotel if this happens. Of course you might be very attractive and the girl you meet at the bar might just be practicing her English, but don't ignore the warning sirens should you see them flashing.



### Every breath you take

As soon as you step out of the plane, you smell it. The China smell. Hard to describe, but if you are a frequent China traveler, you recognize it immediately. My husband can always tell I have been in China, when I open the suitcase at home. The odor you get used to, the problem is the pollution. Some days are just horrible, the thick, white smog laying low over the cities feels suffocating. Beijing has at least banned using coal for heating in the winter, and that helps a

little bit. If you have asthma or other respiratory illnesses, please talk to your doctor before you plan your trip. On twitter you can follow the American embassy measuring the air quality every second hour. Sometimes it is beyond index, meaning the machine they use can't go higher than 500. Some years ago a smartypants at the embassy changed the name to crazy bad, and that kind of says it all. <https://twitter.com/beijingair>

### In case of emergency

Should anything happen you feel you can't handle yourself, call the travel insurance. They have people trained to help you, and can give you advice on where to go for help. The reception at the hotel should also be your first stop. The big hotels have doctors on site, and can recommend hospitals, dentists and police stations. Your embassy also has an emergency number, it can be wise to have that on your phone and with your travel documents.

#### Emergency numbers

Police: 110

Fire: 119

Ambulance: 120

Traffic accidents: 122

Exit & Entry Administration Office of the Beijing PSB

Information desk: 8402 0101

Customer Service Line: 8401 5300 or 8401 5316