

# Tips for Living in China: Advice from a 老外

John Paul Helveston

May 31, 2016

China is a fantastic country with a fantastic culture, but it can sometimes be a difficult or uncomfortable place for the unaccustomed traveler. This document is the result of an accumulation of lessons learned over many trips to China. It is not my intention to rob anyone of a great story or life lesson, but having learned everything on this list the hard way, I hope this advice can be useful.

As a disclaimer to the reader, the sole intention of this document is to help foreign travelers prepare for living in China, especially those who have never visited China before. It is not my intention to pass any judgment on China, Chinese people, Chinese culture, or Chinese institutions, and I encourage you to consider the contents of this document with the same spirit. I also encourage you to spend your time in China with an adventurous spirit. Explore, seek adventure, and spend as much time as you can with local Chinese people. Enjoy the food, the culture, the fantastic transportation system, and keep an open mind :).

If anything in this document seems incorrect or inappropriate, I would greatly appreciate any feedback you might have - feel free to [send me an email](#). Finally, some of this information (e.g. visas) is specific to U.S. citizens. I apologize for being less inclusive of readers from other nations, but I am an American and thus my experiences come entirely from a U.S. perspective.

## **Contents**

<b>1</b>	<b>Passports &amp; Visas</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Restrooms</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Medicine</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Sleeping</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Pollution, Face Masks, and Filters</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Transportation</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Hostels and Hotels</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Mobile Phones</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>The Internet and VPNs</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Miscellaneous</b>	<b>9</b>

## 1 Passports & Visas

- The quick summary: **The visa office will typically give you the minimum required to do what you say you're going to do, so say you are going to do a whole lot more than you probably will do and you will probably get a multi-entry visa with a longer duration of days.**
- It is often difficult to get accurate information on what you need to submit for your visa application. Rather than use the official government website, I trust the information on visa agency websites. My favorite is [mychinavisa.com](http://mychinavisa.com).
- You don't need to carry your passport every day. Nobody will ever ask to see it, so leave it secure in your room and carry a copy around just in case. You are far less likely to lose your passport this way. You will, however, have to show it whenever you check in at any hotel or hostel, so carry it when you're traveling to a new place.
- **In-person vs. Agency:** If you can conveniently get to a visa office in the U.S., I recommend doing it in person. There are only 5 in the U.S. and you must go to the one designated for the state where you are a resident. Otherwise there are a few agencies that can handle this for you, but they charge a fee (often around \$150-200 after shipping costs). I have used the [mychinavisa.com](http://mychinavisa.com) service in the past and been very happy. If you can do it in person, then get there before the office opens so you're the first in line. Pay the extra fees to have it processed that same day if possible, otherwise you'll have to wait 3 days to pick it up. If you don't get it in before noon, they usually won't get the one day turn around done.
- **Multi vs. Single Entry:** "Entry" means how many times you can enter the country on this visa. The visa may not expire for a year, but the entry starts the day you enter. So a 90-day single entry lasts exactly 90 days from when you enter. Even if it doesn't expire until a year later, it's dead 90 days after your enter. If you can get it, I highly, highly, highly recommend getting a multi-entry. It costs the same, and all you usually have to do is check the box for "multi" and they'll give it to you, but you must give a compelling reason why you need it. Your invitation letter is going to say you'll be in China for 8 weeks and won't leave during your stay. This will translate into a single entry, so they'll deny the multi-entry request and give you a single. Instead, write on your application that you will also be visiting Hong Kong to see friends, or also plan to visit Vietnam or plan to come back and see friends later this year, maybe for winter break in December. **As long as you make it clear that you will be entering and exiting more than once (or better yet multiple times) on the visa application, you will likely get a multiple entry visa.** Worst case scenario, the multi-entry request gets denied and you get a single entry. Can't hurt to try getting more.
- **Number of Days per Entry:** The most I've seen is a 120 day visa, but this is rare. You will usually get a 30, 60, or 90 day visa depending on how long you say you'll be in the country.
- As far as your visa goes, Hong Kong is not China. Entering Hong Kong and re-entering China requires a new visa entry.
- **72-hour visa:** Some places (e.g. Beijing International Airport) allow a 24-hour or 72-hour "visa free" stay for very short-term visits. The policies on this are somewhat unclear to me and appear to change often. Googling this would be a better resource than I can provide.

- **10 Year Tourism Visa:** As of 2014, China is allowing a 10-year multiple entry visa for American tourists. This is a highly valuable visa, and I strongly encourage people to get it over other types if you're not planning on staying very long for each trip. If you are doing business (i.e. making money) or are involved in some other official activity (e.g. government), then obviously you should get the appropriate type, but otherwise go for the 10-year. **It is not listed as an option on the visa application, you have to special request it - check out the [example pre-filled visa application](#) on [mychinavisa.com](#).**
- Finally, do not rely on “extending” your visa in China. There is no such thing as a visa extension. Instead, they void your current one and give you another new one, which will almost definitely be a 30 day, single entry. The only place you can get a mutli-entry is from your home country visa office.

## 2 Restrooms

- Always, always have toilet paper on you at all times. Very few public restrooms have TP, and you are generally expected to bring your own. There is no need to carry around a big role as you can buy little packs that easily fit in a bag or purse like these at most stores:



- Don't flush the paper, put it in the little waste bin in the stall.
- Important:



- Do not assume you will find a public restroom. Bigger cities like Beijing and Shanghai have some, but many places do not. Your best bet to search for a McDonalds, KFC, Starbucks,

etc. These places will often have a clean and freely-available restroom. Other restaurants usually have them, but they are reserved for customers.

- Bring hand sanitizer. Like TP, many places do not provide soap.
- Finally, learn to squat with your heels on the ground. Some friends of mine made a [funny video](#) on the topic that is worth watching.

### 3 Medicine

- Bring all your prescription as well as over the counter drugs (tums, ibuprofen, tylenol, pepto, etc.). Depending how long you stay, you will probably at some point get a stomach ache, head cold, or some sort of cold. Often times the best thing to do is just rest and try to alleviate the symptoms with over the counter drugs, but unless you can read Chinese they may be difficult to find. Just keep in mind that when you travel to China you are exposing your body to an entirely different world than it is used to, so it's easy to catch a bug.
- You almost certainly will get a stuffy nose and/or some sort of head cold your first week or so because of the pollution. Prepare for a bad reaction just like you would for allergy season. If you know your eyes or nose reacts bad to pollen, they will probably also react bad to pollution.

### 4 Sleeping

- **Ear Plugs:** China is loud. There's often a lot of construction and traffic noise in the cities. If you're a light sleeper, bring ear plugs.
- **Eye Covers:** The sun rises on China's east coast around 5 - 5:30am, so 8:00am is extremely bright. If you wake up from light, bring an eye cover for sleeping. [This](#) is the best sleeping mask I've found - worth the money.
- **Mosquito Net:** Mosquitoes are pretty bad in China, so you may want to bring along a mosquito net for sleeping. It may sound silly, but a simple, light weight net is a worth while investment to pack (and rather hard to find in China). Even in very nice high-rise hotels, mosquitoes find their way in. Trust me, Chinese mosquitoes are ninjas - they will find you no matter where you are. Life without a net can be quite miserable, especially if you react bad to bites.
- **Beds:** Chinese beds are hard. Very hard. You can usually find some cheap thick foam somewhere in the city to help with comfort. Ask friends and locals for help finding where to buy it, but expect confusion. Nobody puts foam on their beds, so don't describe it as being for your bed. Often times it's sold at carpet markets for padding the floor, so describing it that way is often more successful. Another tip - invert your bed. The Chinese bedding style is a bottom sheet with a big thick comforter for cover. If it's warm out, I just invert the bedding and put the soft comforter on the bottom.

## 5 Pollution, Face Masks, and Filters

- **Pollution:**

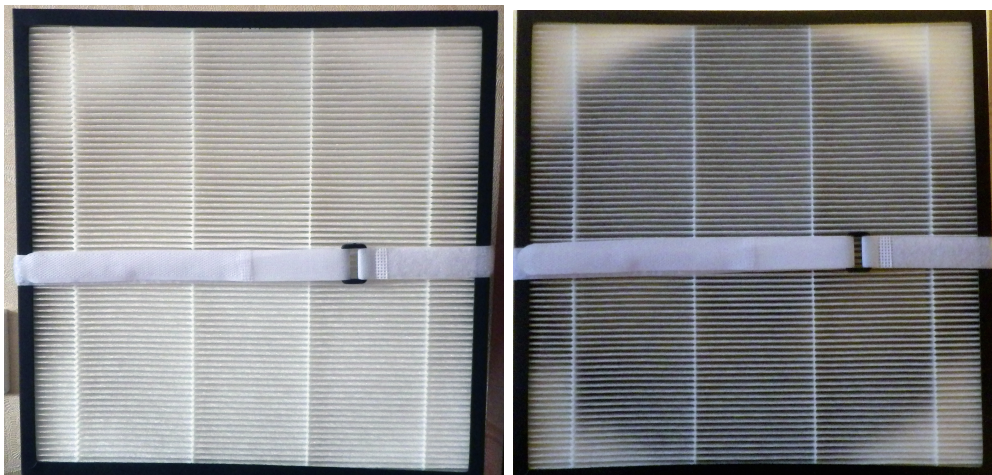
- Unfortunately, China is still struggling with pretty serious pollution in many of its largest cities. I check the Air Quality Index (AQI) on a daily basis while in China. Anything over 200 and I'm wearing a face mask.
- You can check the [U.S. Embassy website](#) for air quality measurements in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Guangzhou, and Shenyang. There are a number of mobile apps that provide the AQI in other locations.

- **Face Masks:**

- I highly recommend wearing a face mask on bad pollution days. Sometimes that might mean weeks at a time.
- Not all masks are equal. A good amount of research is now available on mask ratings and performance. Here are some resources: [1](#) and [2](#).
- I use disposable [3M masks](#) that have a N95 rating. I use the same mask for 2-3 weeks.

- **Room Air Filters:**

- The PM2.5 concentration outside is the same as inside your room, even if you can't see it. Very few places filter the air inside buildings, and your AC unit won't do it either.
- The website [smartairfilters.com](#) provides a lot of information on the subject and sells DIY kits to build an in-room air filter for about 200 RMB (USD\$30).
- Don't think it's worth it for your room? Here's the filter I used during the summer of 2014 after just 30 days (click [here](#) to see an animated GIF):



(a) June 19, 2014.

(b) July 23, 2014.

Figure 1: DIY air filter after 30 days of Beijing air, summer 2014.

## 6 Transportation

- **Cycling:**

- Bicycles are a great way to get around any city in China, and you can buy a cheap used bike for around 100 - 200 RMB. If you're buying / bringing a bike worth anything over \$50, never ever leave it chained up somewhere—it will be stolen. Cities are flat, so no need for multiple gears. Simple is better.
- Bike theft is a huge problem in just about every city in China. The only locks that stand up are U-locks with thick enough bars that can't be cut with a bolt cutter. Good U-locks are harder to come by, and the cheap ones can be easily picked. Although they're expensive, I recommend bringing a Kryptonite U-lock or buying one locally at a specialty bike store. The other strategy (and the one I tend to use) is just to buy a cheap enough bike that it isn't worth stealing.

- **Trains:**

- China's train system is one of the best in the world. The trains are clean, safe, and reliable. Do not be even 30 seconds late - you will miss your train. The sleeper cars are slim but comfortable.
- **Soft vs. Hard Sleeper:** A "soft" sleeper versus "hard" sleeper has no difference in bed. A soft sleeper just means only 4 beds to a section with a sliding door for privacy. A hard sleeper has 6 beds to a section and no sliding door, so a lot less privacy. A "seat" ticket (non-sleeper car) sometimes does not mean you get a seat. Sometimes this means a standing car. The best way to tell the difference is if the ticket has an assigned seat or not. If it does, you'll have a seat, but if not it may be first-come-first-serve and you could get stuck standing a long time.
- **Train Tickets:** Sometimes tickets from city A to city B can only be purchased in city A. If you are in city A and want to buy a ticket in advance from city B to C, then you might need to ask a local friend in city B to go buy it for you. Otherwise, you can buy the ticket when you arrive to city B. Alternatively, you can buy tickets [online](#), but you'll have to pay an agent a small fee. If you don't speak Chinese, the online purchase is a great option.

- **Planes:**

- The Chinese airline industry is just like America's only with (in my opinion) nicer flights and far better customer service. It's quite a pleasure to fly in China. Flight delays and cancellations happen just about as frequently and randomly as they do in the U.S., but if your flight is cancelled then the airline will take care of you like a valued human being. You will be given meals and a hotel at no extra cost.
- **Plane Tickets:** A great site to book flights: <http://english.ctrip.com/>. You can print off your ticket, or just arrive at the airline booth at the airport and swipe your passport. Your ticket purchase will already be in the system.

- **Long-Distance Buses:**

- They will get you from A to B and are very inexpensive, but they are slow, terribly loud, and in my opinion, quite dangerous. Bus travel can also be terrifying (or exciting?) as

it is not uncommon for a driver to swerve into oncoming traffic to pass slower vehicles and frequently do other unnecessary life-risking behavior.

- Some of the buses are fitted with after market horns that can actually cause hearing damage (this is not a joke or exaggeration).
- **Summary:** Despite the low ticket prices, I would always try to take a train or flight if possible over a long-distance bus.

## 7 Hostels and Hotels

- **Hostels:** The hostels in China are wonderful. The target market is foreigner travelers, so you'll often find many more foreigner-friendly things at hostels, like a western breakfast (if it has a kitchen). The staff are often great English speakers and know the town well. Hostels also tend to have softer beds than hotels. They're also often far less expensive than hotels. There is a large variety of room styles, ranging from private rooms to bunk-style shared rooms with 10 or more other travelers.
- **Hotels:** Hotels in China are mostly targeted towards Chinese citizens, so you may have a harder time finding an English speaking employee. Beds are often very hard, and they tend to be a little more expensive than hostels. The upshot is you often can have greater privacy whereas you may be sharing a room in a hostel.

## 8 Mobile Phones

- **Service Providers:**
  - China has several major cellular service providers. The most prominent are China Unicom and China Mobile. Either are quite good and reliable.
  - China uses a GSM network, so your phone must be able to use a GSM SIM card to work.
  - You can buy a SIM card just about anywhere. Often times you can buy them in vending machines (even at the airport right after you land). You can also buy them at most convenient stores like Kuaike (sort of a Chinese 7-11).
  - The only foreign service provider I would recommend is T-Mobile. They had a plan that cost \$50/month for unlimited everything and global, meaning it just keeps working in China as if in the U.S.
- **Phones:**
  - Get a smart phone, preferably Android-base for the best apps for China. I recommend just getting a phone locally, even for a short period of time on the ground.
  - Xiaomi and Oppos are two great Chinese brands that provide all the speed and functionality of high-quality android phones (like Samsungs) but at much lower prices. You should be able to get a Xiaomi or Oppos for 1,000 RMB or less. These are great options if you just need a phone for a short stay and don't want to spend a lot of money.
  - If you have your own smart phone that can use a GSM card, then you should be able to get a SIM card locally and use your phone. Most people that sell SIM cards should be able to help you get it setup.



- **Apps you should use:**
  - **Wechat (微信):** Wechat (“wēixìn”) is the #1 messaging and social networking app in China. Connecting through Wechat is far more common than exchanging phone numbers.
  - **Pleco:** A fantastic Chinese-English dictionary. The free version is quite sufficient for your everyday translating, but it also has a lot of add-ons that are quite nice, including an OCR translator that can look up Chinese characters using your phone’s camera.
  - **The Chairman’s Bao:** For the English-native Chinese language learner, both the [website](#) and [app](#) are great platforms for studying Chinese in a very fun and interactive way by reading short news stories in Chinese. It includes lots of learning tools and has articles for all language levels.

## 9 The Internet and VPNs

- Internet access in most Chinese cities is quite good, and wifi is pretty ubiquitous in airports, hotels, coffee shops, etc.
- That being said, many websites are still blocked by the Chinese government, including Google (which encompasses all Google products such as Gmail and Youtube) and Facebook.
- These sites can be easily accessed by using a Virtual Private Network (VPN). I always recommend having at least 2 (preferably 3) VPN services set up and ready to use *BEFORE* traveling to China. Setting them up after getting to China can be frustrating since many of the VPN service provider websites are also blocked in China.
- My personal favorite VPN is [Vyper VPN](#). It is fast, simple, and provides lots of different servers to choose from. It also is cross-platform, and with one account you can use it on multiple machines and your smart phone.

## 10 Miscellaneous

- **Chopsticks:** If you can’t already use them, learn to use chopsticks. This is critical. If you’re eating with a group, it is common to have a “family style” meal where all dishes are shared; as a result, you may go hungry if you can’t move faster than your peers! Don’t become a victim of the chopstick diet!
- **Carry Cash:** China is mostly a cash society. I highly recommend carrying around 300-500 RMB (\$50 - \$80) at least at all times. While credit and debit cards are often accepted at larger establishments, smaller stores are often cash-only. I rely on ATMs for withdrawing large amounts of cash (2000-3000 RMB) at once to minimize fees, and then carry smaller amounts on me on a daily basis.
- **Coffee:** If you need coffee, bring it. Outside of Starbucks, most coffee in China is instant coffee pre-loaded with tons of powdered cream and sugar. I always bring my own pre-ground coffee on longer trips and use my trusty [aeropress](#) to get my fix!