

# Mike's China



I have travelled extensively in China over the past twenty-five years, on climbing expeditions and as a general tourist. The stories in this book were written to entertain and provide travel advice.

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## 1 Getting around



**There was a time when tourists needed to join a group or hire a guide to visit China. Those days have gone but the myth remains. Part of the problem is the description that is often applied to the country.**

We're still told that China is an emerging economy. This gives the impression of inadequate transport, substandard accommodation, poor sanitation and all those other things associated with the "underdeveloped world".

Admittedly, there are regions of China that are still "emerging". Others have most definitely "emerged". It would be no exaggeration to say that there are as many people in China with a comfortable standard of living as there are in Western Europe or the USA.

What's more, the housing and public amenities, in those parts of China that have "emerged", are newer and more modern than in Europe and America. The parts I am talking about are mainly on the coast. There is still a big east-west divide in China.

You can, of course, join a group to visit Beijing and Shanghai or tour the picturesque towns along the Grand Canal. But there's no need. The whole eastern region of the country is well equipped to receive tourists. Most tourists are Chinese but a fair sprinkling come from outside the country.

Since you are reading this, I can safely assume that you speak English. The Chinese have an amazing ability to learn foreign languages and English tops the list. You won't have too much trouble finding someone who can understand you. My frustration has been in trying to practise my limited Chinese. Too many people want to practise English.

You will find all sorts of accommodation from five-star to no-star. It's amazing just how little impact communism has had on the deeply ingrained Chinese desire to do business. Go north into the former Soviet Union and you will see what I mean.

Booking a hotel or even a guesthouse, in China, can usually be done over the internet in English. There is an extensive network of backpacker hostels and similar accommodation, often run by Westerners.

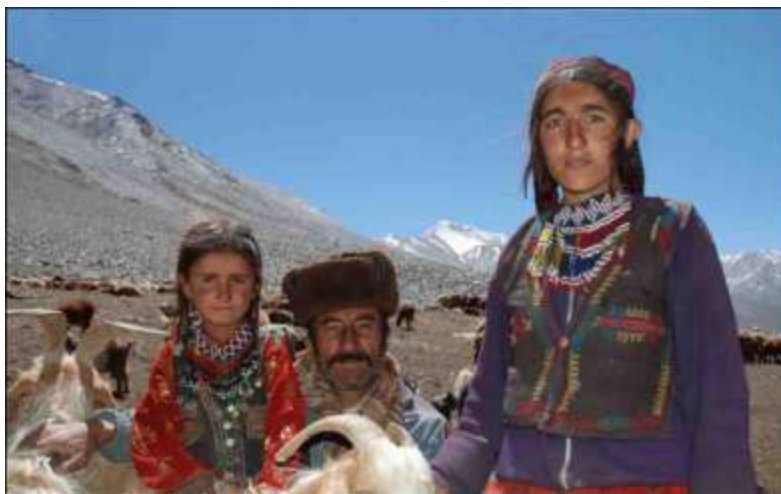
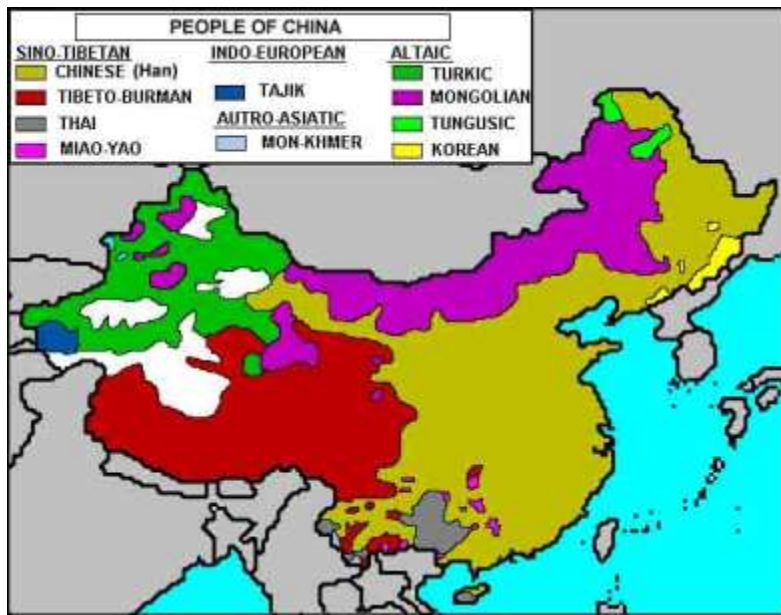
The metro system in the big cities is modern, safe and easy to use. Place names are given in both Chinese characters and Roman (ABC). Information boards and public address systems provide advice in Mandarin (official Chinese) and English. Intercity trains are modern and run on time.

The Chinese are exceedingly sociable. They are used to meeting people who don't speak their own language since China has a huge number of different languages (like Europe).

At daybreak, you will find people in the parks practising their early morning exercises (young and old) or jogging (young). In the evenings many people eat out rather than cook at home. There is a marvellous hustle and bustle. Take the usual precautions when in a big crowd. China is a fairly safe place for travellers but has its problems like everywhere else.

In other stories I talk about travelling out West in China. Things are different there. You may need a permit to visit certain places and it may be advisable to have a guide.

## 2 People







**There are 1,300 million of them and they're all called Chinese. The European Union has a third that number. They are all called Europeans but no one expects them to be the same. We recognise that Bulgarians are different from Spanish and Italians from Danes. The same goes for China. Thirty percent of the population is officially recognised as belonging to minority groups. In Britain they would be called nations**

**(English, Scots, Welsh). The rest of the Chinese population is classed as Han.**

Don't think of the Han as being all the same. For starters, they don't all speak the same. The Shanghai "dialect" is as different from the official Beijing "dialect" (Mandarin) as English is from broad Irish or Scots. Cantonese, sounds so different that even foreigners can tell it apart from Mandarin.

The big unifying factor is writing. Most Chinese characters do not spell out sounds. They convey meaning (like our traffic signs). As a consequence, people with totally different languages can communicate through writing. You will see Chinese handing one another writing pads. They're not asking for an address. They want the other person to write down what they are saying so they can understand.

The Chinese people not only speak different languages, they have different cultures and temperaments. Up north, they are more reserved (like Japanese and northern Europeans). People in Beijing tend to be formal but the same cannot be said for Shanghai. Down south, in the Cantonese speaking regions, they are positively effusive.

In the mountainous borderlands to the north of Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar (Burma), ethnic groups differ from one valley to the next and spill over into neighbouring countries. There is a long history of ethnic tension and hostility to the central government.

In the vast, sparsely populated western regions, the people are even more varied. Many Tibetans do not regard themselves as Chinese and the same can be said for many Muslims in Sinkiang.

Interestingly, many of the "minority groups" were not subjected to the full-rigors of the "one-child" policy and were allowed to have more than one child.

**My photos of people** show the differences between the different ethnic groups. And they have been picked to do just that. Some show people who are still living in the way of their ancestors. It would be wrong to think that all members of their group live like that. I could have shown you shots of Tibetan girls in swimming costumes and Tungusic kids with computers. I have pictures of Yao businessmen in business suits and Turkic farms with TV-dishes but I chose not to show them.

**Photos** (top to bottom): Shanghai, Tajik, Miao, Yao, Tibetan, Mongolian, Turkic. Tungusic.

### 3 Shanghai



**It's one of the world's most dynamic cities and has been for a long time. The Europeans identified Shanghai as the place to do business and dominate China when the country was weak. It was a stronghold of the Mao Zedong communists in the early days of the revolution. Its present ambition is to surpass Singapore and Hong Kong and become the leading financial centre of the region. Shanghai is an interesting and exciting place.**

The city is growing at a prodigious rate. Take a train to the outskirts and you will pass vast housing developments. People are streaming in from China's interior to join in the prosperity. Some are coming as "guest workers" and living in dormitories. Many are coming to settle and put down roots.

Old residential areas in the centre are being ripped down to make way for luxury high-rise apartments. We spoke to a young lady whose family home was recently placed under a compulsory purchase order by the Shanghai administration. Like others before them, they would receive a luxury apartment in return. Her parents planned to lease the apartment and live off the rental income.

Their experience contrasted with that of people we met in Chongqing. There the authorities were requisitioning land needed to house people displaced by the Three Gorges Dam. Owners were complaining bitterly that they were being swindled.

There is a lot of history in Shanghai. Among its ancient buildings are the Longhua Pagoda, Jade Buddha Temple and the tomb of Lu Xun. Qiboa Ancient Town and Zhujajiao Water Town are well worth a visit. I've heard both criticised as "theme parks". That may be true but it doesn't prevent them from being very good theme parks.

The Nanjing Road and Huaihai Road are famous for their fashion houses and restaurants. Walk down the former and you will get to The Bund. The latter leads to the former "French Concession".

The Bund is where the Europeans and Americans had their business houses. Today the buildings fly the Chinese flag. Interestingly, you do not see the flag flown much in China. Nor do you see many statues of political leaders. The



flags in the Bund are a proud reminder that the buildings are now firmly in Chinese hands and the days of foreign subjugation are gone.

The foreign presence in Shanghai was not entirely bad for the city. The foreigners brought prosperity and were opposed to the "Boxers" who were a conservative bunch in league with the oppressive Manchu Dynasty. When the British and French put down the "Boxer Rebellion" and sacked the Manchu imperial pleasure palace, a lot of people in Shanghai were content with the outcome, even if they didn't like the way it was achieved.

The foreigners had "Concessions" of land upon which they built small towns for their nationals. The British and American Concessions have been swallowed up by recent development but large parts of the French Concession remain untouched. Its restaurants and bars were favourite venues for young revolutionaries in the early days of communism. Perhaps that's why it is so well preserved ... I don't know.

I do, however, know something about the attractive, white-barked trees that line the boulevards of the French Concession. They are now found throughout China and widely believed to be French. That's something of a misconception. The trees are native to North America and were introduced into France two hundred years ago ... France is full of them.

### **Shanghai Photos:**

- (TOP) View from the Bund of the impressive new developments on the other side of the river.
- (BELOW) The magnetic-levitation train that will speed you from the airport to central Shanghai in just a few minutes.
- The old-world charm of the former French Concession.
- The Bund.
- Ancient "tea house" that has played host to American presidents and crowned-heads of Europe.
- A cozy Café.







## 4 Nanjing



**Nanjing was founded almost three thousand years ago and was one of China's ancient capitals. Like many great cities, it had a troubled history. I'll confine my attention to events of the recent past.**

The Nanjing Treaty of 1842, followed the first of the so-called "opium wars" and granted Hong Kong to Britain. The war was over the "right" of foreigners to sell opium to Chinese nationals and the outcome was humiliating. Imagine Mexicans insisting on their "right" to sell drugs to Americans.

A hundred years later, the city endured the infamous Nanjing Massacre when Imperial Japanese troops slaughtered tens of thousands of civilians in an orgy of blood letting that gave the lie to the claim that they were on the Asian mainland to liberate Asians from Western colonialism.

Despite the ravages of history, much that is old and impressive still stands in Nanjing. The city's ancient defensive wall survives in huge sections. The bricks from which it is made are stamped with the manufacturer's name. You can see who made the good bricks and who made the bad.

The ancient city gates are particularly impressive. They were built on a massive scale with storage chambers for armaments and barracks for soldiers. The gates are preserved as museums with historical displays and art exhibitions.

Nanjing is renowned for its parks and huge open areas, including the Purple Mountain. That is where you will find many of the city's most important relics. These include the World Heritage Ming Dynasty tombs and many ancient shrines. The mausoleum of Sun Yat-Sen, the father of modern (republican) China, is near the Ming tombs.

The Confucius Temple is a popular destination for residents and visitors alike. The building is situated beside a small river. A picturesque bridge and floating tea houses add to the attraction.

There is a lot to see on foot in Nanjing. I like to get up early and go for a stroll. People are out and about as soon as the sun rises. It's a time to socialise and do exercises. I never cease to be impressed by the way Chinese mix with one another and with outsiders. Being sociable is deeply ingrained in the Chinese psyche. You will see young people out jogging. Older people do t'ai chi exercises or a variant of them.

The parks in Nanjing are full of people exercising in the morning. I would like to report that they are in the majority but I would be stretching the truth. Far more are hurrying to work or school. There is a sense of urgency in China these days. Some older people think it's gone too far. They pour venom on Mao with one breath and yearn for a return to a more relaxed lifestyle with the next.

I met a few old people who idolised Mao but they were in a small minority. Younger people are different. Many say his name with awe. They are proud of the new China and have been brought up to believe that it's all due to Mao with a bit of help from Sun Yat-Sen. My hero is Deng Xiaoping, who upturned Mao's crazy system and set China on the road to prosperity. When I mention him to young Chinese I get little response.

Not much survives from Mao Zedong's reign. The general standard of construction was so bad that most has been knocked down and replaced by something better. There is one notable exception in Nanjing and that is Yangtze River Bridge, built in the 1960s. It received the full publicity treatment of the age and is lavishly decorated with masterpieces of revolutionary art depicting farmers, soldiers and factory workers, claspng Mao's Little Red Book.

Nanjing is not a popular destination for overseas visitors but is well worth a visit. The city mixes the old with the new. Its shops are world class and its metro system is outstanding.

**Nanjing Photos:** (TOP): New Nanjing

**Nanjing Photos:** (BELOW): Old Nanjing

- City wall
- Revolutionary figures on Yangtze River Bridge
- Ming Tombs



## 5 Huang Shan



**We have all seen Chinese paintings of misty mountains with trees and temples hanging in space. It is a very old style and I used to think of it as pure fantasy. Then I went to China and was surprised to discover how close it comes to real life.**

My plane descended towards Shanghai and suddenly the clouds looked very Chinese. They were the puffy sort you see in Chinese paintings. All that was lacking was a few mountains and the odd dragon.

I got a further surprise when we visited the Huang Shan Mountains. They are perpetually bathed in mist. It swirls about granite pinnacles and forms seas in deep valleys. You rarely get more than a glimpse of anything before the mist returns. Trees cling to rocks and shrines poke up on ledges. They are there one moment and gone the next.

I tried to photograph the scene and was always frustrated. Like the rainforest, the mountain is all around you. Individual elements are impressive because you know they are there. Getting them together to form a picture requires skill. The artists of antiquity developed a style that captures the spirit of the mountains. Photographers rarely achieve the same result without a lot of photoshopping (mucking around with the digital image).

Today, you can get on a train in Shanghai and be at the foot of the Huang Shan in a few hours. Cable cars speed you to the top. It was very different when I first went there twenty-five years ago. You had to trudge up a pilgrim path. The mountain is now equipped with tourist hotels. Twenty-five years ago, there was just one place to stay unless you found a monk or nun who was prepared to put you up at their place.

Going back was a bit of a disappointment but don't let me put you off. The Huang Shan are one of the great natural wonders of the world. You can put up with the crowds and the commercialisation. The scenery makes the whole thing worthwhile.

I returned last year with my wife. We took the precaution of avoiding Chinese public holidays but forgot about Korean holidays. The place was overrun with South Koreans. Over two thousand had descended on the cable car station.

To add to the problem, the Chinese bureaucracy was insisting on seeing everyone's passport. The excuse was security and the alleged danger was suicide bombers. God/Buddha/Confucius knows how seeing a passport will stop people blowing themselves up. We would have waited hours if a Chinese tour guide had not taken pity on us. He included our passports with those of his (overseas) party and we went up with them.

Once on top you have to walk. That means taking a small bag if you are staying at one of the hotels. Your other luggage can be left below in a locker. The walk to the hotels is long and if you can't manage it you should stay at the bottom. There is a lot of climbing and descending but the going is easy. The paths are worthy of an emperor. No expense was spared creating steps and walkways from blocks of granite.

If you don't want to carry your bag you can use the services of one of the many porters. These are immensely fit people of all ages who carry stuff around on poles slung across their shoulders. I was told that much of what they do could be done by vehicles but that would put an end to their jobs. The official policy is to provide work for the locals and not displace them by machines.

If you like a bit of solitude in beautiful places then stay on the mountain for at least one night. The crowds melt away towards evening and it's quite peaceful after the last cable car has gone back down. It stays that way until the first cable car arrives the next morning. Then the pressure builds up as more and more people are disgorged.





## 6 Grand Canal



**The Grand Canal is part of an extensive system of waterways that criss-crosses eastern China and links the four major rivers. Large parts were in place during the Tang Dynasty, a thousand years ago. The ancient towns along the banks are favourite destinations for Chinese tourists but attract few visitors from overseas.**

They are picturesque, historically interesting and easy to visit. You can get a travel organisation to arrange a guided tour or you can make your own arrangements.

My preference is for the latter. It's cheaper and you don't have guides breathing down your neck and taking you to places where they will receive a commission if you buy something.



My wife and I recently toured the canals in the Shanghai region. We took trains and stayed in tourist and business hotels, making our bookings on the internet. My rudimentary knowledge of Mandarin was not needed. There's no shortage of people anxious to practise their English.

The canal towns have an aging population. The old buildings are beautiful but do not meet the standards of modernity to which most young people aspire. Rather than let them decay, many municipalities have bought up large sections and developed them for tourism. Those we saw were tasteful and preserved enough of the past to give a good impression of what the towns were once like. After the lunatic destruction of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese are at pains to preserve their cultural heritage.

A good way to see the canals is by boat. This can be done by joining the other tourists and going on a cruise. Or, you can catch one of the regular ferries and join the locals as they go about their daily lives. The latter is far cheaper and far more interesting.

The old houses rise straight up from the sides of the canals. In some places, markets line the banks. In others, there are boat yards, potteries, distilleries and other industrial sites where old crafts are still practised. Ancient bridges span the waterways like the humps of serpents and are still in use for pedestrian traffic. You will see watergates, temples and ancient fortifications.

Don't forget to take your camera.

## 7 Tiger Leaping Gorge



**It's in Yunnan Province, close to the border with Tibet and near the famous Yangtze bend. The locals say it's the highest gorge in the world, far exceeding the Grand Canyon. I went there with my wife and was disappointed. We joined a queue of tourists and made our way along pathways and tunnels until we reached the spot where the mythical tiger made its leap. The scenery was spectacular but scarcely record breaking.**

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