

China

By Josephine Brouard



**IN THE LAND OF THE
YELLOW STAR, EVERYTHING
IS SUPER-SIZED**

AS A HOLIDAY destination, China has never been high on my list of travel priorities, but after a whistle-stop, four-week tour of six cities, I've returned a reluctant Sinophile, boggled and bemused by everything I saw in this land of communist rule. Communist? Well there, immediately, is one of China's perplexing contradictions, beautifully illustrated by the many folkloric tales that Chinese locals love to share with visitors from abroad. One such anecdote, gleefully recounted by one of many guides I met along my travels, describes how former US president George W. Bush, Russia's Putin and China's current leader, Hu Jintao, were driving together in a car before reaching a T-junction. The driver turned to the leaders and asked them in which direction to go and Bush Jnr (or "little Bush", as our Chinese guide described him) said, "Turn right." Putin, the Russian leader, said, "Right." The driver then asked

Jintao which way to turn and he replied: "Make a signal to turn left, but turn right."

The joke is simply this: in China, the leadership professes to be communist, but the truth is it's capitalist. And you'd better believe it. From 1949, Chairman Mao presided over this vast land with a communist vision of dominance, but since his demise in the mid-'70s, and especially in the past decade, the country's ruling junta has turned its eye to the free market. Everywhere you visit, the power and wealth of the world's fastest-growing economy is potently palpable; its 1.3 billion people may not be individually wealthy, but the collective fiscal might of China is everywhere to see. ▶





SHANGHAI

Take Shanghai, for example. After landing at Pudong International Airport, I'm soon aboard a train shuttle to the city centre and, seemingly instantaneously, find myself slap-bang in a CBD pumped on steroids. Like a country hick chewing on a blade of grass, I can do little but gape at the city's science-fiction skyline, the glossy shopping boulevards and the teeming, seething crowds. They call Shanghai "the New York of the East", despite having more than double its population – but, in truth, I feel more like I'm Dorothy in the Land of Oz. Everywhere I look there are pretty young things in denim, bows and lace giggling together as they stroll; cool dudes with architectural haircuts among a sea of city workers in silky suits toting sun umbrellas; and spry elderly folk, very often with adorable toddlers in tow sporting hedgehog hair, enormous almond eyes and chubby cheeks. Only a few hours in this steamy, pulsating, alien city, and Australia seems a gazillion miles away.



Everything, for starters, is on a mammoth scale: to house their densely urban populations, many cities, including Shanghai, have corridors of skyscrapers fringing the city's ring roads. I'm here for the 2010 World Expo, and Shanghai is spruced and polished to within an inch of its life: never have you seen streets so devoid of litter. China clearly has no shortage of manpower. In fact, I'm struck by how five people here do what one person back home would do. Underground there are myriad officials to ensure that getting from A to B goes slickly

Shanghai boasts a sci-fi skyline, a population double that of New York, and adorable toddlers (right) aplenty

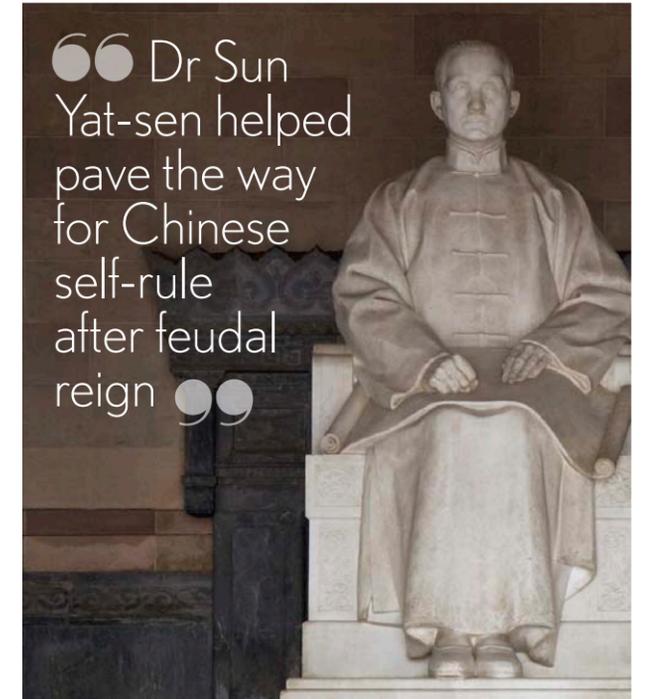


and smoothly. At the Expo site itself, Westerners verge on panic attacks as jostling hordes snake through turnstiles as far as the eye can see. Three days later, my head still spinning from the sights and experiences of this mega-city – whooping and whistling with an enthralled audience at a spectacular acrobatics show; braving a snappy new haircut at a trendy CBD salon; trying on tailor-made clothes for hours in one of the city's finest silk emporiums; taking in by riverboat the dazzling night-time skyline of a city that, literally, never sleeps – I am almost relieved to leave.

HANGZHOU

Luckily for my credit card, too, it's time to move on to Hangzhou, a "smallish" city with a population greater than Sydney's. Today China has well over 100 cities with one-million-plus citizens, but in around 1350, Hangzhou was the biggest city in the world with just 430,000. About two hours south-west of Shanghai by car, it's renowned for its beauty, offering an exquisite contrast to the Red Bull-infused pace of Shanghai. Once settled in our three-star hotel, costing a fairly typical \$65 a night, we take a wooden junk ride on the city's famous West Lake. Bordered on three sides by lush greenery and on the fourth by the city skyline, the lake is dotted with willow-fringed isles, incense-steeped pagodas and traditional bridges that have stood for centuries. Birds whoop and whirl. It's enchanting. Our guide recounts the legend of the jade dragon and golden phoenix that came together to mate, giving birth to the lake and gifting it to the people of this rich rice-bowl valley. Like so many of the locals we meet during our visit, our guide has a romantic way of describing events and places; no surprise, then, to discover that poets are much revered in China. The following day we visit the lavishly restored Lingyin Buddhist Temple. In China,

most things are meticulous and enormous, and this proves no different. Four giant guardians, two fierce, two benign, shield a giant golden Buddha in a shrine surrounded by smaller outbuildings; one contains 500 statues, each 3m tall, and what's thought to be the world's tallest bronze structure, a vaulted canopy housing a further four ornate figures. Next we visit a tea plantation in picture-perfect countryside dotted with rows of tea bushes, and learn about the antioxidant effects of green tea. I become an instant convert and promptly purchase a canister of Dragon Well, formerly enjoyed by emperors and still served today to the top brass in Beijing. **NANJING** Next stop is Nanjing, a city that has served as China's capital more than half a dozen times over the centuries. We visit the mausoleum of the "Father of the Nation", Dr Sun Yat-sen, who helped paved the way for Chinese self-rule after the reign of the feudal dynasties. Close by, in the same gigantic park, is another burial site, this one in honour of the Ming Dynasty's founding emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang. The two sites are in complete contrast: the former is partly inspired by 20th-century European architecture; the latter dates to the 1300s with a high moat wall of enormous stone blocks,



“ Dr Sun Yat-sen helped pave the way for Chinese self-rule after feudal reign ”



In Hangzhou, the beauty of West Lake, below, showcases a more traditional China, while in Nanjing, above, the city's history is meticulously detailed

and a giant, ornately decorated and meticulously restored wooden structure. Also here is the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, which marks the slaughter of 300,000 Chinese civilians at the hands of Japanese invaders in December 1937. Strikingly, the final exhibit in the museum forms a beautiful, poetic epilogue, asking us all to forgive what happened, but never to forget, in order that it may never happen again. Later, we visit a famous temple – a favourite of Confucius – that displays a wonderfully calming feng shui, as befits the man whose scholarly insights on how to live a balanced and harmonious life have been passed down for more than 2500 years.

GUILIN

A few days later we are in Guilin, a proposed World Heritage site that supposedly inspired the movie *Avatar*, winding our way up the mountains to visit a village of the Zhuang, a minority ethnic group. I hate it when my destination turns out to be over-commercialised but, alas,





this is one of those moments. You can't see – let alone enjoy – the vistas of mountain-fringed paddy fields for the profusion of shacks offering amulets, embroidery and other bric-a-brac.

Luckily, in China there's always the luxury of an hour-long foot massage to look forward to, followed by a head and neck massage – each costing the equivalent of \$20. It's a ritual I promise myself I'll maintain when I return to the West.

XI'AN

Next up, I board a flight for Xi'an and its famous Terracotta Army. The backstory behind the city's baked-clay troops proves fascinating: China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, was obsessed with living and ruling forever, and insisted that his medicine men find him an "elixir of life".

The mercury-laced pills they produced ironically brought about the emperor's painful and protracted death – and so, in anticipation of his demise, he ordered tens of thousands of workers to begin building a mausoleum that, even today, takes your breath away with its scale and detail. The catacombs cover over 50km² of terrain and entomb some 8000 unique, life-sized infantry, cavalry and charioteers fashioned from clay moulds, baked at

scorching temperatures and hardened, then painted.

The paranoid emperor also arranged for the slaying of the workers to preserve the tomb's secrets and to accompany him in the afterlife, then threw in a posse of concubines for good measure, ordering that they be buried alive.

Next, just outside Xi'an, we visit the winter palace of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty (685 to 762 AD) who fell in love with a concubine so beautiful, it was said that "flowers were shy to bloom in her presence for fear of being upstaged". Fearing her power, the emperor's advisers convinced him to kill his concubine, and she was strangled in 756 AD by court eunuch Gao Lishi. Today, the tragic love of Emperor Xuanzong and Imperial Consort Yang is revered as China's own *Romeo and Juliet*.

HIGHLIGHTS OF CHINA

1. Prices way cheaper than Australia, including our ten-day tour with three-star accommodation, breakfast and lunch, entrance fees to museums and sights, three internal flights, chauffeured car and tour guide, all for \$1800 per person
2. Early morning activities in the parks: ribbon sticks, feather soccer, kite flying, flute playing, line dancing, group opera singing
3. Fruit on skewers
4. The efficient and punctual underground

5. The cleanliness of public streets and parks.
6. The eagerness of Chinese to be helpful, despite not understanding foreign tongues
7. Chinese translations into English, eg, "black is chill this month", instead of "black is cool this month".
8. Foot and body massage parlours everywhere, at affordable prices.
9. Chinese babies and toddlers: definitely the cutest in the world
10. The romantic storytelling, fables and mythology all Chinese people adore

In China, parks are full of folk, top left, doing tai chi to stay young and fit; a tourist "must" are the terracotta warriors top right, at Xi'an

BEIJING

In the Chinese capital I find myself confronted by the city's notorious smogginess; ceaseless crowds; zero comprehension of English; hotel apparatchiks asking (again) for my passport; inedible "Westerner" breakfasts... and all of it has me briefly yearning for home.

Luckily, the feeling doesn't last, as my wanderings around Tiananmen Square and the fabled Forbidden City prove completely beguiling. Later I stroll to a nearby park and join a throng accompanying a dozen musicians on trumpet and saxophone. As I listen, I feel myself tearing up as locals sing with concentrated gusto.

The wisdom of Confucius, the values of Taoism and the pursuit of the mighty dollar: you couldn't imagine a more contradictory, confounding and scintillating destination than China. It's a country simply impossible to forget. ●

