Welcome to China: A Survival Guide for International Conference Delegates

Your first 48 hours — connectivity, payments, transport, safety, etiquette.

Welcome to China! 👋

If you are reading this on your phone at the airport, you are in exactly the right place. This page is written for international delegates arriving for a conference — it is the short list of things that actually matter in your first 48 hours, not a 200-page handbook.

Everything here is based on China's official guidance for foreign business visitors — the *Guide to Working and Living in China for Business Expatriates*, published by the Ministry of Commerce together with the immigration, tax, and transport authorities — plus the practical realities that official documents tend to leave out.

📄 **Want it offline?** Download the printable PDF version and keep it in your camera roll.

⚡ The 60-second version

If you read nothing else, read this:

1. **Get online.** Install a translation app *before* you need it, and check whether your home mobile plan includes roaming.
2. **Set up a payment app.** Alipay or WeChat Pay linked to your international card turns your phone into a wallet that works at every noodle stall in the country.
3. **Carry your passport.** It is your ID for hotels, train tickets, SIM cards, and museums.
4. **Hand your passport to the hotel.** They register you with the police automatically. Stay somewhere private, and *you* have to do it within 24 hours.
5. **Save four numbers:** 110 (police), 120 (ambulance), 119 (fire), 12367 (immigration hotline, English available).
6. **Don't tip.** It is not expected anywhere, and it can cause mild awkwardness.

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1. Getting online

China has fast, cheap, near-universal mobile internet. The only real surprise for visitors is that **some overseas apps and websites may not load on local mobile data or hotel Wi-Fi** — this commonly includes several Google services, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and X.

You have three practical options, and none of them require any technical setup:

Option	How it works
International roaming	Data from your home carrier in many cases routes through your home network, so your usual apps keep working. Check your carrier's China rates before you fly — it is usually a few dollars a day.
Conference / corporate access	If your host organisation provides delegate Wi-Fi or a corporate account, use it. Your conference host helps delegates with this every year.
Local SIM card	Cheap and fast, and the most reliable option for Google Maps-free navigation (see the app list below).

Buying a local SIM is easy but needs your passport: walk into an official China Mobile, China Unicom, China Telecom, or China Broadband shop with your passport and a local phone number is issued on the spot. Airport counters and hotel concierges can help. An eSIM from an international provider is the fastest option if you want data the moment you land.

> **Plan for it:** during your first day, assume you may be relying on email, WeChat, and the local apps listed below. Install them on hotel Wi-Fi, then check what works.

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2. Paying for things

China is close to a cashless society. Your foreign credit card works at international hotels, big department stores, and airports — but **not** at the small shop, the noodle place, or the taxi. Those take QR codes.

Set this up before you land:

1. Install **Alipay** (支付宝) or **WeChat** (微信), or both. Both have English interfaces.
2. Register with **your home phone number** — you do not need a Chinese number.
3. Add your **international bank card**: Visa, Mastercard, JCB, Diners Club, and Discover are supported (UnionPay too, obviously).

What the official guidance says about fees and limits:

Rule	Detail
Single transaction up to ¥200	No surcharge
Single transaction above ¥200	A 3% service fee applies
Spending limit on a linked foreign card	Up to US$5,000 per transaction, US$50,000 per year

Also worth knowing:

- **Some foreign banks block the link.** If your card is rejected, call your bank — several issuers decline the verification request by default. A second card from a different bank usually solves it.
- **Cash is still legal tender.** Carry a few ¥100 notes for emergencies. If you are staying on a linked card, keep the balance above ¥50 so you can always buy water.
- **Bringing cash in?** The limit for carrying RMB in or out of China is ¥20,000 per person per trip; amounts above US$5,000 equivalent in foreign currency must be declared at customs.

- **ATMs** at Bank of China, ICBC, and major airports accept international cards. Bank counters and currency exchange desks at the airport can also change money.
- **No tipping.** Not in restaurants, not in taxis, not at hotels. Service is included.

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3. Getting around

Metro — the best option in every big city

Signage is bilingual, announcements are in English, and a single ride costs a couple of yuan. Two ways to pay:

- **Alipay → Transport (出行)**: select your city, verify your ID once, and you get a QR code to scan at the gates. Works for metro and bus.
- **Ticket machines / counters**: buy a single-ride card with cash or a QR code. Frequent travellers can buy a stored-value transit card with their passport.

Didi — ride-hailing, in English

Download **Didi** (滴滴出行) or open it inside Alipay. Enter your destination in English, and the app handles the language problem with the driver. Airport taxi ranks are official and metered — **ignore anyone inside the terminal offering you a ride**, no matter how helpful they seem.

Trains — the way to travel between cities

High-speed rail is fast, punctual and inexpensive. Tickets are sold on the **12306** website and app, which have full English versions, or at station counters.

> ⚠ **Passport verification first.** Foreign passengers must complete identity verification before buying tickets — either upload a photo of your passport's data page in the 12306 app, or show your passport at any station ticket window. Do this once and it is done for your whole trip.

Maps

Google Maps is unreliable in mainland China. Use **Amap (高德地图)**, which has an English mode, or Baidu Maps. Hotel business cards with the address printed in Chinese are still the single most useful navigation aid — screenshot them.

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4. Where you sleep, and the 24-hour rule

This is the item most visitors are surprised by, so it comes straight from the official guidance:

> **Every foreign visitor must be registered with the local police.**

- **Staying in a hotel?** The hotel does it for you at check-in. Just hand over your passport and make sure you get it back.
- **Staying in a private apartment, a rented flat, or a friend's home?** You (or your host) must report to the **local police station (*派出所, pàichūsuǒ*) within 24 hours** of arrival, taking your passport and the rental contract or property deed.

Not every hotel is licensed to host foreign guests — small domestic guesthouses sometimes are not. International-brand and business hotels always are. If you are booking anything unusual, confirm in advance that they accept foreign passports.

Also: carry your passport with you. It is the legal ID for hotel check-in, train and plane tickets, SIM cards, and many attractions. A photo on your phone is a useful backup, not a substitute.

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5. If something goes wrong

Number	What it is
110	Police
120	Ambulance / emergency medical
119	Fire
122	Traffic accidents
12367	National Immigration Administration hotline — 24/7, with English service, for visa and immigration questions
12308	China's consular protection hotline (for Chinese citizens abroad — useful to know, but it is *your* embassy you should call)

- **Lost your passport?** Report it to the nearest police station immediately and ask for a *passport loss report* — you will need it for an exit visa from the immigration authorities. Then contact your embassy or consulate. Save your embassy's address and phone number in your phone before you fly.
- **Getting ill:** hospitals in major cities have international clinics and VIP/international departments with English-speaking staff; payment is expected up front, so travel insurance with medical cover is worth having.
- **Tap water is not drinkable.** Drink bottled or boiled water; hotels provide kettles and bottled water.
- **Photography limits:** do not photograph military facilities, police, security checkpoints, or government buildings — this is taken seriously. Ask before photographing people.

Keep your wits about you in tourist areas. Common approaches include the "tea ceremony" invitation, the overly friendly "student" who wants to practise English, and unlicensed drivers. A simple rule covers all of them: if a stranger is steering you towards a specific shop, bar, or vehicle, walk away and use an official app or rank instead.

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6. Etiquette that actually matters

Small things, big impact.

Business cards and contact. You will not exchange paper cards much — you will exchange **WeChat QR codes**. It is the default business contact, the group chat, the document-sharing tool, and the wallet. Add colleagues on WeChat and you are on the same page as everyone else in the room.

Cards, if you do use them: give and receive with both hands, and read the card for a moment before putting it away.

Banquets and toasts. The host toasts first. The word you will hear is *gānbēi* (干杯, "dry the glass") — you are welcome to sip rather than drain it, and nobody will force alcohol on you. Never stand chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice (it resembles incense at funerals) and do not flip a whole fish over.

Gifts. Skip clocks (the word sounds like "the end"), umbrellas (sounds like "separation"), and sharp objects. Choose something from your own country, and avoid white or black wrapping paper. Gifts are often politely declined two or three times before being accepted — that is a ritual, not a refusal.

Saving face. Disagreement is expressed indirectly. "We will consider it" often means no; a public correction costs far more than the mistake did. Kindness and indirectness go a long way.

Practicalities. Be punctual, but allow generous time for traffic. No tipping. Queue where a queue forms, including at metro security — every station has a bag scanner, and it is quick. Smoking is banned indoors in most cities and can carry a fine. The number 8 is lucky, 4 is not.

Plugs and power. 220 V, 50 Hz, with type A (two flat pins), C (two round pins) and I (three flat pins) sockets. Bring a universal adapter; the power bank you carry must be in hand luggage.

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7. Apps to install before you land

App	Why
WeChat (微信)	Messaging, payments, contacts — the operating system of daily life
Alipay (支付宝)	Payments, ride-hailing, metro and bus QR codes, translation built in
Amap (高德地图)	Accurate navigation, including transit directions
Didi (滴滴出行)	Ride-hailing with an English interface
12306	High-speed rail tickets
Trip.com	Flights, hotels and trains in English
Baidu Translate / Microsoft Translator	Camera translation for menus and signs — install one before you fly, while you are still on a network you trust

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8. Ten phrases

The effort is appreciated even when the pronunciation is not perfect.

Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning
你好	Nǐ hǎo	Hello
谢谢	Xièxie	Thank you
多少钱?	Duōshao qián?	How much is it?
厕所在哪儿?	Cèsuǒ zài nǎr?	Where is the toilet?
不好意思	Bù hǎoyìsi	Excuse me / sorry
我不会说中文	Wǒ bú huì shuō Zhōngwén	I don't speak Chinese
你会说英语吗?	Nǐ huì shuō Yīngyǔ ma?	Do you speak English?
请帮我	Qǐng bāng wǒ	Please help me
我要去这个地址	Wǒ yào qù zhège dìzhǐ	I want to go to this address
买单	Mǎidān	The bill, please

📸 The screenshot card

Screenshot this and keep it in your phone — it is the version you will actually use.

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EMERGENCY        Police 110 | Ambulance 120 | Fire 119
IMMIGRATION      12367  (24/7, English)
PAYMENTS         Alipay / WeChat Pay, linked to my home card
TRANSPORT        Alipay > Transport (metro/bus) | Didi (taxi) | 12306 (train)
HOTEL            Registered by the hotel. Private stay = police within 24 h.
ALWAYS CARRY     Passport, hotel card in Chinese, a little cash, power bank
TIP              Not expected. Anywhere.
WATER            Bottled or boiled only.
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Official resources

- **Guide to Working and Living in China for Business Expatriates** — Ministry of Commerce and eight other departments, 2025 edition: gov.cn announcement (Chinese and English versions)
- **National Immigration Administration** — visas, residence permits, 12367 hotline: nia.gov.cn
- **China Railway 12306** — English ticket booking: 12306.cn/en
- **Visa-free and visa policies change often.** Confirm your own nationality's current status with the nearest Chinese embassy or consulate, or on the NIA site, before you book.

📄 Download this guide

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Print it, screenshot it, forward it to the rest of your delegation. It is a quick read on a long flight.



Scan this to share the guide with another delegate — or keep it on your phone home screen.

A note on this page

This guide was put together by a volunteer greeter for international conference delegates, drawing on China's official *Guide to Working and Living in China for Business Expatriates* and on the practical details that first-time visitors ask about most.

Policies — especially around visas, visa-free entry, and payment limits — are updated regularly. Treat this as a friendly orientation, and the official sources above as the authority.

Safe travels, and enjoy China. We are glad you are here.