

FROM

*Barbarians
to Babes*



Far left: Signs and posters advertising Plaza 66 shopping mall, Shanghai

Inset: Mao's Little Red Book

Left: Enjoying a drink in Lan Kwai Fong, Shanghai

There was a time, not so long ago, when foreigners were known in China as "barbarians". The word was used in both casual conversation among Chinese people and in the official documentation of the Imperial Qing court, and testified to the unruliness of those unfortunates born outside the boundaries of the celestially favoured Middle Kingdom.

Foreigners visiting China these days are in no danger of suffering such scorn, but that isn't to say that Chinese views on the outside world have developed that deeply. The international isolation that preceded the 19th-century Opium Wars was repeated in the 20th century under Mao Zedong's Communist leadership. The result is that many Chinese still view the world as composed, essentially, of two parts: China and Foreign Places. Expect lots of curious stares and questions about what your *waiguo* (outside

China) food/money/houses/clothes/lifestyle are like. You may or may not be asked exactly which country it is you hail from.

One of the most interesting side-effects of this lack of subtlety is that anyone who looks remotely non-Chinese tends to become an instant celebrity, particularly outside the major cities. Many teachers of English as a foreign language have graduated from the classroom to take up starring roles in local TV programmes or illustrious modelling careers in advertising. China is the new "Wild East" – a land of opportunity where fame and fortune is just around the corner. Talent, or familiarity with your product, is not necessarily required.

One person who has thoroughly earned his extraordinary fame is a Canadian by the name of Mark Rowsell. Known to more

than 1 billion Chinese as "Da Shan" (Big Mountain), Rowsell has been appearing on Chinese TV for nearly 20 years speaking flawless Mandarin on a variety of entertainment and language shows. He may be virtually unknown in his home country, but – statistically

speaking – Rowsell is one of the most famous men on the planet.

In the same way that Chinese people can sometimes take a clichéd view on the outside world, many "foreigners" still view China as a mysterious kingdom where an idyllic way of life has been unmolested for millennia. Even now, there are some who return from China swearing they were the first foreign faces ever to have grazed any given village, town or city. Unless you are planning on doing some serious trekking in the wilds of Tibet, it's extremely unlikely you'll be able to justify such a claim. The sight of a foreigner is no longer the traffic-stopper it once was. Indeed, in 2005, China became the fourth most visited country in the world.

Even the Middle Kingdom isn't immune to a rank-and-file tourist invasion.

Chinglish

China's curiosity about all things "foreign" manifests itself in the popularity of the English language. Nowhere is English studied and practised more enthusiastically. It doesn't mean it's always intelligible, though, as these (genuine) signs prove.

- "Do not pi's anywhere" (Make proper use of the urinals), Guangzhou Public Toilet
- "After first usher on, do riding with civility" (Let passengers disembark first), Shanghai Metro Station
- "Cowboy Leg + Block Pepper Retchup" (??? with Black Pepper Sauce), Beijing restaurant
- "No fight and scrap. No rabble, no feudal fetish and sexy service" (No fighting, hooligans, pervers or prostitutes), Ming Tombs, Beijing

Getting Your Bearings

If Beijing is China's distinguished elder statesman, Shanghai is his wayward mistress – a city that has lived fast, and may well die young. In only a few centuries she has grown from impoverished minnow, fishing for scraps at the mouth of the Yangtze River, to swaggering financial giant, dictating terms to the nation.

It was a drug-fuelled transformation. Prised open by British guns in the First Opium War, Shanghai became educated in the ways of the world by gangsters, bankers and political radicals. After a wild adolescence, she spent 30 years in rehab. Time stood still as Communism's puritanical impulse kept the 'Paris of the East' in check. But almost the minute China opened up again, Shanghai was flashing her charms at the world. Once more, she grew rich on the attention.

The future should be bright for Shanghai, but beneath the glossy veneer she is slipping into depression. Every year she sinks further into the swamps upon which she was built. If that master of killjoys – global warming – has his way, Shanghai will be one of the first to find herself underwater.

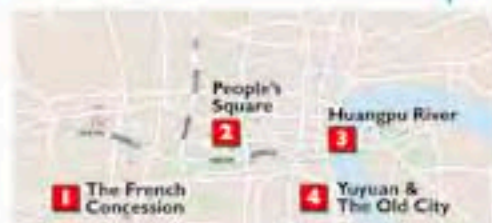
But there's little sense of impending doom. Shanghai revels in danger and – thanks largely to the financial attractions – the finest minds in China are helping the grand dame to come to terms with her problems and grow ever stronger. In the meantime, she continues to seduce most who pass her way.

Waiting in the wings, meanwhile, are the rivals – Hangzhou, Suzhou and Nanjing. These cities of refined manner and classical beauty deservedly get their fair share of suitors. With the distances between them small and the roads easy, it would be remiss of any visitor not to play the field.



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Page 65: Looking down to the atrium of the Grand Hyatt Hotel, Shanghai

Opposite: The Pudong skyline



At Your Leisure

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Left: Riding along the top of the City Walls, near West Gate, Xi'an

Below: The Terracotta Warriors stand in rows under a giant roof

although not all are on public display. Despite the astonishing work and sacrifice that went into creating it, the army was designed never to be seen and bears witness to Qin's power and megalomania.

The figurines are displayed in three separate pits around which permanent buildings have taken shape. Pit One is bigger than a football field. So far more than 2,000 of an estimated 6,000 life-sized figurines have been unearthed. They are aligned in military formation and are extraordinarily expressive, each one boasting its own hairstyle and unique facial features. Pit Two contains chariot drivers, cavalry, archers and infantrymen, and broken arms and heads can still be seen scattered in the solidified mud. Pit Three is the smallest and is believed to represent the army headquarters.

Xi'an

Xi'an outshines even Beijing in terms of history and culture. As the final destination for the camel-led convoys of the Silk Road, Xi'an is the template for modern Hong Kong – a place where east and west collided with spectacular cultural and economic results. The city's ancient charm may have been eroded but, thanks to a chance discovery in 1974, it now boasts one of the world's greatest tourist attractions.

Xi'an was first made capital of China in the 11th century BC. The city rose and fell again and again until the Tang dynasty (7th–10th century AD) when it became firmly established as China's political and cultural centre. Under the stewardship of the Tang emperors, Xi'an saw a great flowering of the arts and science. Scholars and merchants flocked from all corners of the known world and the city became a huge, cosmopolitan melting pot. Xi'an may be one of the few cities in China that is smaller today than it was 1,000 years ago.

Walking the **City Walls** is the best way to conjure the atmosphere of that golden age. Even though the modern wall was built only in 1374, it was raised on the foundations of the former imperial compound. The entire circumference is 13.7km (8.5 miles) and, for a fee, tourists can clamber up at each of the four compass points and hike the entire way around. Alternatively, there's a wall-top shuttle (5RMB per stop, 50RMB entire circuit).

Clay Army

Xi'an's greatest attraction actually lies 37km (23 miles) east of town. During a drought in 1974, peasant farmers digging a well made one of the world's greatest archaeological discoveries. And the mystery is still unravelling today.

The **Terracotta Warriors** (Bingmayong) form a vast underground army whose sole purpose was to guard the tomb of Qin Shihuang, the first man to unify China in 221 BC. The figurines are estimated to number around 8,000,



Expect to spend around half a day exploring the pits and viewing the excellent exhibitions. You'll probably also need to factor in time at the huge market outside where you can buy Terracotta Army-inspired souvenirs.

Old Xi'an

Back in Xi'an proper, head towards the cluster of landmarks that lie in the middle of the city. The **Great Mosque** offers the best sense of Xi'an's cosmopolitan history. Originally built in 743 by Persian merchants, it was moved to its modern location in the 14th century, while the current building only dates from the 18th century. With a traditional Chinese pagoda serving as the minaret, the mosque melds a traditional Chinese temple layout with Arabic and Persian embellishments. The timber-built main prayer hall is a highlight. Just around the corner are the **Bell and Drum Towers**, facing each other across a newly built square. In Xi'an's glory days, the bell would have been rung as the city gates opened at dawn, and the drum struck as they were closed at dusk. Both are open daily.

The oldest building in town is the **Greater Wild Goose Pagoda**. The seven-storey structure was built in AD 652 at the request of legendary monk Xuanzang, who walked his way to India in the name of Buddhist learning and brought back invaluable translations of original texts. The 64.5m (212-foot) temple contains a few simple reproductions of these scriptures, but there's no English translation. It is one of the few places where you can witness original Tang-era masonry and is regarded by many as the symbol of the city.

TAKING A BREAK

Bars and cafes are clustered around **Defu Xi'ang**, an alley that runs parallel to Nan Dajie, just to the northwest of the South Gate. This is an atmospheric place to grab a beer or cup of coffee.

15T E1 Shaanxi province

The Terracotta Warriors

029 8139 5001; www.bmy.com.cn 26 Mar–Nov daily 8:30–5:30, Dec–Feb 8:30–5 Moderate, prices vary during the year Book a tour in Xi'an, or take public bus 206 from the square beside the railway station



Shaanxi History Museum

91 Xuzhou Donglu 029 8521 9422;

www.sahm.com

Mid-Mar to mid-Nov daily 8:30–6:30, mid-Nov to mid-Mar daily 9–5:30

Moderate, price varies during the year

Xi'an's South Gate (Yangning)

XI'AN: INSIDE INFO

Top tips The best spot to scale the city walls is at the **South Gate** (40RMB). The views of the city are excellent and the **Bellin Museum**, a few hundred metres to the east, has a fascinating collection of excavated stone tablets and carvings, many of which date back more than 2,000 years.

- The **Shaanxi History Museum** is second only to the Shanghai Museum in showcasing the very best of Chinese history and culture. There are impressive displays from China's greatest two eras, the Han and Tang dynasties.

One to miss **Gin Huangshi's Mausoleum** is 1.5km (1 mile) east of the Terracotta Warriors. It's believed even more figurines are buried here, though full excavations have not taken place. Visitors are limited to climbing round the mound and walking around the exhibition halls.

2 Dunhuang

Dunhuang is long way from everywhere. Lying right at the far end of the Hexi Corridor in northwest Gansu province, this lush oasis town was the last stop for Chinese Buddhist pilgrims heading to India and a welcome return to civilization for those who made it through the Taklamakan Desert. Many of these adventurers were also artists and left their stunning legacy at the nearby Mogao Caves.

With the sand dunes of the Gobi Desert rearing up at the edge of the city, Dunhuang has an undeniable wow factor. The urban centre has benefited hugely from a recent makeover and is now leafy and pleasant, but the real attraction remains the **Mogao Caves**, which lie 25km (15.5 miles) southeast of the city.

Seated Tang Buddha (inset) in the Mogao Caves (bottom)

Mogao Caves

The so-called "caves" are actually a series of man-made shrines, each containing stone sculptures and rock paintings. They were excavated by hand across a 1.6km-long (1-mile) sandstone cliff face. There were once more than 1,000 caves, but only 428 remain today. Of these, only 30 are open to the public and you will be permitted to see a maximum of 10 on any given day. The number of accessible caves may dwindle even further as China gets serious about conservation.

The complex dates from AD 366, when a Chinese monk on his way to India had a vision of Buddha. Believing he was on holy ground, he convinced a wealthy Silk Road pilgrim to fund the creation of the first cave.

