

## Working in China

Zoe Belshaw BA VetMB MRCVS

### Language

- To a first time non-Mandarin speaking traveller, China can be a very baffling place, and straying far from the major cities may be rendered almost impossible unless you are accompanied by a good linguist.
- Students from Chinese universities are very keen on international collaboration, and will probably be very willing to help with any projects in which they can get involved.
- Whilst Beijing, Shanghai and some of the larger tourist spots have English language signs, the vast majority of the country works on the complex character system, making even a guess at directions, timetables, menus pretty tricky.
- Recent guidebooks, such as the Lonely Planet, which now breaks the vast country into a few smaller guides, are tremendously helpful however, and have very good cultural introduction sections which are well worth a read.
- Even a very basic grasp of Mandarin would be a huge advantage. The Chinese accent varies a lot from area to area and even somebody from the south west can struggle to understand the harsher Beijing accent, so it does take a lot of practice. Many UK colleges now run basic courses, and are well worth a try.
- Expect to be stopped in the street by people trying to practice their English or taking your photograph.

### Pre-departure checks

- Before you go anywhere, you need to ensure that you have a valid visa, and if travelling overland, valid visas for all the transit countries as these will be checked at the Chinese border. [The Chinese Embassy](#) has all the details, and several companies can do the long queue in Portland Place for you, for a fee of course.
- Updating a visa when in the country can be tricky, and any irregularities on arrival at a border post may well lead to you being rapidly expelled.
- It is always worth checking the [Foreign Office](#) website before departure to check for any warnings and recommendations, and they have excellent advice on cultural issues and common problems encountered.
- Only the Beijing embassy has the power to re-issue a lost or stolen passport, so pre-departure photocopies are well worthwhile. [www.britishembassy.org.cn](http://www.britishembassy.org.cn) is the place to go if you get stuck.

### Medical advice

- Vaccinations needed vary according to the area to which you are travelling – malaria, rabies and Japanese – B encephalitis are endemic in certain areas – your GP or local travel clinic should be able to advise you on what is needed.

- Insurance is a must, and it's worth having air evacuation cover for remote regions. You will almost certainly get a bout of diarrhoea, so a good medical kit is a must.
- Mobile phones are ubiquitous, but coverage is still poor in many areas. A wind up charger is a good idea if you are on a remote project, as is a wind up radio to at least attempt to get the World Service.

## Transport

- Transport links between major cities are probably easiest on the train - they cover much of the country, run to impeccable timing, are a great way to see the more rural regions, and experience the incredible organization and zeal of the train attendants if nothing else – woe betide you if you try and sleep on the floor of a hard seat train!
- There are several classes of train coach - hard seat, or 3rd class being just that, and best avoided on journeys over 12 hours in length.
- The whole country runs to Beijing time, making timetables ever so slightly easier to interpret than they might be otherwise.
- In some big cities, there are a few English speaking booths in the stations, and ask for advice on which queue to get in to – this can be incredible obscure
- In major cities, the buses are regular and travel guides can be helpful in which number goes where. Local buses reach the most remote corners of the country, and given prior warning can accommodate seemingly impossible amounts of luggage.
- Bicycles are a great way to get around on the good roads in big cities, with bike lanes very common and well respected by motorists.

## Consumables

- You will be able to buy most consumables out in China, especially anything made of plastic, and all towns have amazing labyrinthine markets selling almost everything you could ever need.
- Clothes and shoes tend to be in small sizes though, so worth taking at least the basics.
- The variety of food is incredible, and whilst Walmart and other big chains are in the cities, Western food is less common in the rural regions.
- The water is best boiled, and fruit and veg well washed before eating. Avoid ice, and particularly juicy watermelon as these can be pumped with untreated water to increase their weight.
- Vegetarianism can be tricky in rural areas, but possible.
- The range of foods is incredible - chickens feet and pigs trotters are amongst the commoner delights and worth a try, if only once.
- Most of the food is very laced with chilli – for hot on a menu, read inedible.
- Chopsticks are normally the only utensil available. You need to break the pack of 2 apart then rub one on the other vigorously to remove splinters before eating.
- In the Tibetan regions of Yunnan and Sichuan, Buddhism is prevalent, albeit covertly, so eating meat may not be as socially acceptable – check before eating in company.
- Beer is most widely available alcohol, but the low alcohol tolerance means the drink of choice is often green tea, seen carried in a huge range of vessels from jam jars to empty cola bottles.

- Jinglibao, a honey flavoured soft drink is well worth trying on a hot day.

## **Culture**

- Chinese culture, bureaucracy and tiers of authority are very different to those in the West and must be respected at all times. If the correct routes are followed, the vast majority of times people will be as helpful as possible, but it is very offensive to try and cut corners and not show sufficient respect.
- There is still a major block on much information from the West, and even well educated students will have quite an interesting take on the world, especially politics and historical events. Again, challenging these views can lead to great offence and is best avoided, though amicable discussion can be very revealing.

## **Veterinary logistics**

- At the time of writing, it was not possible to obtain any guidance on the legalities of an RCVS registered veterinary surgeon working in China.