



What's Happening on the Ground in China

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Four years after my last visit, I landed in Shanghai, a brief stop before traveling to Huai'an, my family's smaller city. In a race against time, I rushed to clear immigration through the self-service lane, feeling a bit uncertain because I had never used these automated lanes. The first barrier lifted with a simple tap of my passport on the machine; the second barrier lifted with my thumbprint.

Within a minute, I was through, which totally surprised me. The joy was short-lived, however, due to a flight delay followed by missing the last shuttle to my hotel at 11:00 p.m., located a mere 2.6 kilometers (approximately 0.6 miles) away.

My next option? Braving the taxi line, a decision not taken lightly given previous experiences with taxi drivers notorious for rejecting short rides. I asked the nearby staff if the taxi drivers would decline such a short journey. I got a firm "No!" but I took my place in line feeling doubtful. To my relief, when it was my turn, the taxi driver showed a hint of disappointment but accepted the ride anyway, an indication that local authorities may have imposed stricter regulations on the taxi industry.

During my stay in China, I couldn't help but feel like a total rookie as I roamed the streets. I was the only one fumbling with cash, while everyone else (young and old) was swiping their phones for payments. China, it seems, has transitioned into a predominantly cashless society.

The popular modes of payment are WeChat and Alipay, mobile apps that link directly to users' bank cards. QR codes for mobile payments are everywhere from malls to restaurants and even street vendors, making transactions very convenient.

Some places have even implemented face-payment technology, in which customers can make payments by simply looking into a camera. I was shocked to discover grocery stores using face recognition technology on their lockers. (It's worth noting that several of these technologies were in place years ago. However, having left China in 2007, I never fully experienced their development and implementation at the time. My recent encounters with them still impress me after a prolonged absence.)

Life in China has become incredibly convenient, especially in cities, where one can order food, groceries, and delivery services almost around the clock, and where service attitudes are pretty good too.

Another observation that struck me was that traffic cameras are everywhere. It's extremely rare to have police officers pulling someone over to issue a speeding ticket as there's no need for it. Even minor violations, such as maintaining a distance of less than 50 meters between cars, can lead to fines. The level of precision in enforcing traffic rules using technology is noteworthy.

China's adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) also surpassed expectations. EVs are not only popular in top-tier cities but have also gained significant traction in secondary and tertiary cities as well. Even average earners, such as my sisters, drive EVs and both live in lower-tier cities too.

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Traveling across China has never been easier, thanks to the extensive high-speed train network. I heard about a “coin test” in which people put a coin on its edge during the ride, and it stays put at 300Km/hour. That's some crazy stability.

Moreover, real-time authentication, including the integration of train tickets with each traveler's unique national ID, makes getting on/off the train a breeze. These developments pose initial challenges for foreigners as they need to download multiple apps for everyday living. Yet, once used to it, life becomes very convenient. Also, in China, the great firewall is very real. Google and Google-based apps and other websites are blocked, as well as social media apps like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit, causing virtual private network (VPNs) to be essential for foreigners visiting China.

It's wild to see how much China has grown. I remember back in the day when we had to gather at a neighbor's house just to watch TV because hardly anyone had one. In comparison, even rural areas now boast widespread internet access and modern amenities. Many old houses have been replaced with new apartment buildings, giving villages a fresh look. However, this progress also fuels varying attitudes towards the government, with top-tier cities experiencing technology/real estate crackdowns leading to capital outflows and emigration, while lower-tier cities appreciate government policies that have improved access to healthcare, education, and infrastructure. It appears that people in lower-tier cities are a lot happier with the government and officials.

Nonetheless, not everything is rosy. Unemployment rates, especially among the younger generation, are on the rise due to fierce job competition and sluggish economic conditions. The transition from labor-intensive to technology-intensive industries exacerbates the problem, as the latter create fewer job opportunities.

Additionally, anecdotes from my friends suggest clashes between central and local governments have resulted in abandoned projects, further impacting the economy. China's escalating youth unemployment problem may also be worsened by an unexpected source: the affluent retirement incomes of the older generation. Often, these retirement benefits overshadow the salaries of new graduates, inadvertently disincentivizing youth employment. This is further amplified by Chinese cultural norms whereby parents, known for their generous support towards their children well into adulthood, even undertake major financial obligations like buying houses for their marrying offspring. These practices could potentially dampen young people's motivation to seek employment.

Education is another area of concern. Heavy homework burdens many students and their families, leading to an intense and highly competitive society. Wealth disparity is still a significant issue, reflected in varying levels of civility among residents. Despite these societal challenges, consumer spending still seems somewhat robust, and urban life remains vibrant and bustling.

In short, returning to my homeland for an extended stay has been a profound experience with a reverse cultural shock catching me off guard. China's explosive growth is evident, but it coexists with complex societal issues that demand attention and solutions. As China continues to evolve, I think its journey towards progress and harmony will be a fascinating one to observe.

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Page 2 of 2

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