

# CHINA: MEGA-CITIES VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN TO TOURISTS



With almost 20% of the world's population it is no surprise that China is home to some of the world's most populous cities and, as the country continues its push to develop mega-cities in each of its provinces, Chinese citizens are relocating from rural to urban environments at a blistering rate.

And yet, except the business and tourist hubs of Beijing and Shanghai the cities of China are relatively unknown to those outside of the country, and even sometimes to the Chinese themselves. **There are more than 40 Chinese cities with a population of over 2 million, and even the largest ones struggle to escape from beneath the shadow of Shanghai and the capital.**

The challenges faced by these cities are clear. As China reaches out to the world in an effort to attract both tourists and industry to its shores, cities that would no doubt be major contenders in virtually any other country find themselves struggling to attract interest - or even awareness - from overseas.

As the Chinese become ever hungrier for western culture, craving everything from American music to cheap and tasty fast food, cities of millions in the provinces often struggle to attract global brands to their high streets. The McDonalds, Burger King and Starbucks franchises that can be found everywhere from the Bund to the hutongs surrounding the Forbidden City are few and far between in the provinces, despite strong demand from a growing middle class with deep pockets and a love of all things western.

The city of Hanzhong in Shanxi province is no exception. With a population of over four million Hanzhong certainly qualifies as a major conurbation, and yet it is little known outside the immediate area. Only once has the city risen from obscurity, when in 2010 a vicious knife attack in an elementary school on the city's outskirts resulted in the death of a teacher and seven students.

However, Hanzhong and cities like it deserve more than the fleeting interest of the media. Hanzhong is home to industries including aircraft, chemical, food and beverage, and with a growing population, a strong real estate market and booming business it is far from the inconsequential backwater suggested by its reputation.

The challenges faced by such cities have not gone unnoticed by those tasked with raising their profiles. Zhai Xiaole, Hanzhong's head of foreign affairs, is in charge of attracting business and tourism to the city, and he bemoans what he sees as a slow rate of growth in his home city. Zhai knows that Hanzhong needs to diversify and expand its industries in order to compete with nearby cities such as Beijing and Xian, and yet he feels the city is stifled by government policies. "This area is prohibited from building more polluting industries," he said, "so we cannot develop other big industries. We have to protect the natural environment, but we also need international exchange."

**Mega-cities such as Hanzhong may be struggling to compete in an international market but their citizens are certainly hungry for a taste of the west**, as can be seen in the bustling high-priced bars that fill the streets of these little known cities. Belgian and German beers sell for as much as \$13 a pint, and local demand is high even at that eye-watering price point.

"Western culture is the mainstream culture at the moment, whether you admit it or not," argues He Jianghai, owner of Starry, a new bar in Hanzhong. When local beers such as Tsingtao can be found for as little as 50 cents a pint, the fact that locals are happy to pay more than 20 times the price for a taste of the exotic is a clear sign that China's hidden mega-cities are ready to step into the spotlight.

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