

CHINA BUSINESS REVIEW

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Financial Services in China's Changing Economy

PROPERTY DEVELOPERS
AND CHINA'S
CREDIT CRUNCH

P. 12

Q&A WITH THE
CEO OF MOODY'S

P. 16

VENTURE CAPITAL
PARTNERSHIPS

P. 20



P 65
S
PLT 1
729

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SPECIAL REPORT ON
INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

p. 24



35



46



50



54

FEATURES

EXPORT CONTROLS

35 The Export Control Risks of US-China Technology Collaboration

As US-China trade expands to higher value goods and services, companies should carefully assess how US export control laws may affect their activities.

BY JIAN BIN (BEN) GAO AND DAVID HARDIN

GOVERNMENT PROCUREMENT

40 Navigating China's Government Procurement Market

Despite progress in regulating government procurement, issues of transparency and enforcement remain problematic.

BY JOHN LENHART AND KYLE SULLIVAN

LAND REFORM

46 Land Reform in China

Despite reform efforts in recent years, land seizures in China have become a growing source of social unrest.

BY ZHU KELIANG AND ROY PROSTERMAN

HUMAN RESOURCES

50 Managing the Ambitions of Chinese Professionals

Though compensation is important, career progression, better benefits, and a company's strategic vision are all critical factors in whether an employee takes a new job.

BY CHRISTINE RAYNAUD

SAFETY

54 How Safe Is China?

BY INGRID LOMBARDO

DEPARTMENTS

6 China Conference Calendar

8 Short Takes

11 China Market Intelligence

New Initiatives Encourage Private Investment in Chinese Industries

BY JOIE MA AND RYAN ONG

56 USCBC Bulletin

58 China Business Lifestyles

Smartphone Apps to Help Navigate Life in China

BY JENNIFER SUN

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How Safe Is China?

BY INGRID LOMBARDO

Visitors and foreign residents can take steps to increase safety during their stay in China.

On July 22, it rained in Beijing for 16 hours. Inadequate drainage caused flooding, which caused 57,000 people to evacuate their homes. Thirty-seven to 300 people, depending on the report, died due to drowning or building collapse. Commentators blamed China's infrastructure, saying it was either antiquated or built in a hurry in the race to modernization, for the damage and deaths. Suddenly, safety was on everybody's minds.

CET Academic Programs—a company that sends roughly 650 study abroad students to China every year—

thinks a lot about safety in China. Many of the threats to American students in China are the same threats foreign residents and visitors face. In an effort to provide safety tips for tourists and business people in China, CET surveyed staff members who have lived in China for two or more years, some since the 1980s.

Everyone agreed that living in China felt relatively safe. Most interviewees felt that China was safer than the United States in terms of violent crime, but that living in China posed other risks, particularly in terms of food safety, traffic

safety, and petty theft. While most colleagues reported feeling some threats—mostly minor—to health and well-being, one respondent indicated she had never had a safety issue in one and a half years living in Beijing.

FOOD SAFETY

Foreign visitors are likely to be confronted with food safety issues while in China. In a survey conducted this year, more than 80 percent of respondents in 16 major Chinese cities said food safety was one of the “most worrisome safety concerns” in China. Nine out of 11 CET staff members have reported being affected by food safety issues while living and working in China, including food poisoning from Chinese and Western restaurants. Fears about tainted cooking oil have led one staff member to cook at home frequently.

To reduce the risk from unsafe food, CET staff recommends avoiding the cheapest restaurants, such as food stands, and bars with suspicious drink specials, such as “foreigners drink free.”

which is a red flag for counterfeit alcohol. Hotel buffets, where food sits out for a long time, should also be avoided. Seafood can be risky, according to one staff member who ended up with food poisoning four or five times over 10 years. Cooking at home can eliminate the risk of ingesting fake or toxic foods. Always wash fruits and vegetables before peeling, cutting, or eating.

ROAD AND TRAFFIC SAFETY

Traffic safety can be a major concern for foreigners living in China. According to a 2011 *New York Times* article, China has nearly double the number of traffic-related deaths per year compared to the United States—despite having about one-third the number of vehicles on the road. About half of CET staff members have reported issues with road or traffic safety while living and working in China. One staff member was involved in a major accident while riding his motor scooter; he and his two children were hit head-on by a bus with faulty breaks. All three suffered skull fractures. Luckily, they recovered due to the excellent medical care they received in China and the United States.

To reduce the risk of traffic accidents in China, always wear seatbelts in cars that have them and helmets on bikes or scooters. Stay alert at all times on the roads, whether driving or on foot. Visitors and expats in China may want to avoid motor scooters or overnight buses to reduce the risk of being involved in a traffic accident.

THEFT

Petty theft of items such as bicycles and wallets is one of the most common crimes in China, but visitors and business people can take steps to reduce risk of theft. Six out of 11 CET staff members reported having personal items stolen while living and working in China, including two wallets, one scooter, one bicycle, and one iPhone. Both scooter and bike were taken despite being locked. Petty theft can be prevented by keeping personal affects in front pockets instead of back pockets and never slinging bags over backs of chairs or out of sight. The taxi meter

scam—when a taxi driver “forgets” to turn on a meter—can be avoided by always taking official taxis and making sure the meter is running. Bike thefts can be difficult to avoid, but residents can reduce thefts by using multiple locks or keeping their bicycles parked in sight when possible.

HEALTHCARE

Nowadays, major cities in China have expatriate hospitals with international standards; those uneasy about local medical facilities can access an international hospital in most cases. CET staff members have had diverse experiences with healthcare in China—especially when traveling outside major cities—but none reported major safety concerns with the healthcare system. CET issues each of its students a wallet-sized emergency contact card that includes the phone number for the nearest international hospital and a 24-hour English-language hotline for medical advice and hospital information throughout China. Students are instructed to keep this card with them at all times, especially while traveling. Foreign residents and visitors in China should keep similar information with them in case of a medical emergency.

POLLUTION

China’s air pollution is a growing concern both among Chinese citizens and foreign residents. Two out of 11 CET staff members reported problems with pollution while living and working in China. One staff member with a preexisting sinus condition reported more frequent sinus infections in Beijing; another started developing asthma after a few years of living in Beijing. Ways to lessen its effects include avoiding outdoor exercise on the worst days, wearing a face mask, and purchasing an air filter for one’s home.

OTHER SAFETY CONCERNS

Other safety concerns while living and working in China include issues related to politics, anti-foreigner sentiment, or lack of information. One staff member reported that cement and soda bottles were thrown at her during a soc-

cer game at the Worker’s Stadium. One staff member who was in China in 1999 said he felt uncomfortable after the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Many people said aggressive things to him at that time. (Though the United States government says the incident was an accident, Chinese officials still say it was a “barbarian act” by the United States.) Another staff member reported a feeling of trepidation around foreigners in Beijing in August 1989 after the Tiananmen Square protests; the whole city seemed “on edge” and locals were afraid of being associated with foreigners. Staff members also reported feeling a sense of unease during the SARS outbreak in 2003, when lack of reliable information led to an abundance of rumors about the extent of the outbreak. The “100-day crack-down on illegal foreigners” in Beijing this year, when police patrolled expat and tourist areas and conducted random passport and visa checks, also led to a sense of unease.

China remains a relatively safe country, but visitors and residents should remain cautious in certain situations. It can be easy to adopt a false sense of security in China. Foreign residents and visitors should always be prepared and aware. Limit drinking while in unfamiliar settings and avoid going out alone at night. CET would also advise against taking specific safety incidents in China and applying them widely. “Life in China is generally safe as long as one is knowledgeable about potential safety issues,” one staff member said. “China is not sound-bitable,” another staff member noted. “Every city and population is different ... There are positive and negative themes running through everything ... Don’t base your opinion on the last sensational story you heard.”

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