

When I was a child, my parents would host Chinese schoolchildren in our home for their week in Manchester as part of a trip to experience British culture and learn English. My experiences with these children, being similar ages to me, was fascinating; they were from a land roughly 5000 miles away yet we shared interests such as video games and playing basketball in our local parks. To contextualise my experiences with these children, I borrowed Edgar Snow's 1937 *Red Star Over China* in my first year at Univ. This was the first report of the Chinese Red Army, then a guerrilla force, published in the Western world. Snow travelled with the Red Army, interviewing senior members (including Mao Zedong) and staying with villagers. I was intrigued by the stories of heroism in fighting and travelling, as retold by Red Army officials, and wanted to understand how the socialist principles of the early Chinese Communist Party (CCP) translated into the globalised, seemingly capitalist nation that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become. I was able to experience China thanks to the generosity of David and Lois Sykes

My month-long trip took place in two parts. The first was a journey by train from Beijing to Xi'an, stopping at Datong, Pingyao, Luoyang and the final Maoist commune Nanjiecun. The second half consisted of a 357km cycle across rural Shaanxi Province from Xi'an, the eastern terminus of the Silk Road, to Yan'An, the centre of the Chinese Communist Revolution from 1935 to 1947. Travelling solo and venturing off the beaten track meant I could connect with local people in an attempt to compassionately assess thoughts about the CCP and China today. Google Translate was invaluable when trying to cross the language barrier; assume conversations were conducted using software unless otherwise stated in this diary. I sometimes use the English names that Chinese people gave when introducing themselves.

Part I: Beijing to Xi'an

Beijing

02/09/2024

Landing at the militarily clean Beijing Capital International Airport, I was asked to fill in a card outlining my specific itinerary in China. This had not been fully decided – I was unsure about my original plan of hiking to Boa'An (the end of the CCP's Long March and Edgar Snow's residence when writing his book) because of its seemingly highly rural location. I jotted down a brief itinerary which was different to the itinerary I had presented to secure my Visa and hoped for the best. At passport control, no less than five borders official compared my Passport and Visa pictures with my face. The eyes of each official darted between me and my documents, followed by a coy giggle and a call for another colleague who would do exactly the same thing. The final official asked to look at more pictures of me on my phone. He gestured to suggest that my facial hair was different now to in my pictures, reminiscent of a Lucas and Walliams sketch of the same incident, before sending me on my way.

I received a free ticket for the metro because I did not have access to the internet to use the mobile payment applications, AliPay (made by Alibaba) or WeChat, that are ubiquitous in China. These all-in-one applications (super-applications) can be used to message friends, watch viral videos, book taxis, pay for anything and much more. Payments were made by the payee scanning the vendor's QR code and entering a price. This was the first incident of a handful that highlighted that one is a second-class citizen in China without a smartphone.

I immediately headed out of the hostel to buy a SIM card. I asked a recently married young couple on the street for help – Andrei (who was Russian) and his Chinese wife very kindly walked me to a shop to start the process. She used her ID card to buy the SIM card for me, a process which took an hour because of the endless identity checks. The couple had met online because Andrei wanted to learn Chinese and she had volunteered via an online service because she spoke some Russian. They

bought me tea and ice cream afterwards, which was my first experience of the incredible generosity people show to tourists here. We stayed in touch by becoming friends on WeChat – they helped me to top-up my SIM card a few times during my time in China.



My first friends in China!

03/02/2024

In *Red Star Over China*, Edgar Snow spoke of Red Army soldier taking the doors of villagers to use as beds. The villagers were said to be willing to help the Communists in any way – they liberated starving villages from kleptocratic warlords. It seems the tradition of makeshift sleeping arrangements has not been forgotten; my hostel bed has a large vertical lump in the middle.

Today I discovered how to use Alipay to rent bicycles on the street. In my mind, the streets of Communist China are filled with people cycling old bikes; the reality is people using mobile phones to rent sparkly new city bikes. Beijing is full of cycle lanes so it was a pleasure to see the city on two wheels. One evening I found myself joining a pack of hundreds of pushbike and motorbike riders because the police had closed off a number of roads. I noticed that Beijing police would pull a gate across the cycle lane when the lights changed to red, to prevent cyclists ignoring the lights. However, cyclists would squeeze through the closing barriers until the space was too tight to fit through. I also noticed people laughing and arguing with police around Beijing. People were not scared of openly disrespecting or disregarding instructions from the police, at least in this part of China.

04/02/2024

I headed to the Forbidden City, the Imperial Palace complex and residence of 24 Ming and Qing dynasty Emperors. I queued for hours at the Passport gate, which is a fixture in visits to any museum, place of interest, train station or even public park in China. Locals can present ID cards. I was astonished by the pottery housed in a room immediately left of the main entrance, holding pieces from 200 BCE to the 18th Century. Early pieces were in earthy colours with swirls and circles, while late pieces depicted imperial courts in colourful tones. With vast technological and political change in China over the past 75 years, it is easy to forget the rich cultural history. The combination of easily burned wooden construction and political turmoil has meant that many ancient structures present in China today have been extensively restored or completely rebuilt (e.g. the Ming Dynasty Temple of Heaven). I found it bizarre that placards at museums would celebrate when cultural artifacts are preserved by the benevolence of the CCP. A good example is the 17th Century Lama Temple that was preserved because of intervention by Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and interviewee in *Red Star Over China* during the Cultural Revolution.

05/02/2024

While cycling a rental bike to the Summer Palace, built by Jin dynasty rulers in the 12th Century, I noticed a large bookshop. I stopped to examine the literature – English copies of *Catch-22* and *Twilight* were found, but no *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Fahrenheit 451*. Book censorship is understood to focus on Chinese authors, with censors less concerned about literature intended for a high-brow audience as long as direct references to CCP leaders are removed. I found a toilet in the bookshop. To dispense toilet paper, a machine outside the cubicle required me to watch an advert which I could access using a QR code on my phone. Was I about to receive a single sheet? I never found out because my foreign phone could not access the advert.



I never accessed my “paper towel treasure,” as the translation software rendered it.

06/02/24

Today I travelled by high-speed rail to the Great Wall of China at Badaling. I was a little disappointed to discover that this section was entirely rebuilt in 1957. It was, however, a wonderful hike with a beautiful view as the sun began to set. While walking I got chatting to an English-speaking Chinese tour guide – she taught me the words for ‘England’ and ‘Chemistry’ (my degree subject) in Mandarin. From Southeast Asia to Cairo and Guatemala, I have never met a tour guide that did not ask for money after chatting to me, especially at an attraction such as this. But China was different. I did not feel like an economic commodity to be exploited here. My currency was still powerful, even in Beijing, with enormous plates of meat at restaurants costing pounds in the right places. Have communist principles made people friendlier, or has China’s interpretation of capitalism raised wages for tour guides?

I joined a group of travellers for dinner. We met Julien, a French expat working as a translator for Alibaba, a Chinese technology superpower. He took us to a wonderful Uyghur restaurant. We discussed the alleged ‘Social Credit System’ in place for Chinese citizens, which some media outlets claim is used to curtail economic, social and cultural freedoms for citizens with low scores. Julien said that CEOs may be monitored and have freedoms removed for acts against the government (such as the well-publicised disappearance of Alibaba CEO Jack Ma), but regular citizens are not monitored by a central database and given a score. Indeed, the only officially recognised government ‘Credit Rating’ system monitors financial activity; most banks are government-run so a credit system would be indirectly government-run anyway. We also discuss the need to present ID to visit almost every kind of attraction or access transportation, and the quasi-compulsory nature of certain mobile super-applications for economic activity (the use of cash was extremely rare). We agreed that there is an element of surveillance, particularly with the ID, but I believed that there must be some economic application to all of this data. Is the government selling this data about the pastimes of their citizens, to supplement the data collected by super-applications, to technology companies? Most companies, including Alibaba, have some kind of state ownership.

07/02/2024

Today I attempted to visit Tiananmen Square, the location at which Mao proclaimed the founding of the PRC in 1949. I had tried to visit earlier in the week, but realised I needed a ticket to enter the square. Armed with my ticket, I headed for the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong at one corner of the square, which is Mao’s final resting place. I was stopped by a large group of schoolchildren who asked for a photo. I asked where Mao’s Mausoleum was. The student with the strongest English-speaking ability was pushed towards me and, through much giggling, they communicated that I could only visit the Mausoleum in the morning.

Datong

08/02/2024

Today I took the train to Datong, savouring the beautiful countryside while listening to a podcast. Fortunately, local buses accepted cash, because I hadn’t set up the app for paying for bus travel. A kind older gentleman showed me to my room in the hostel. Through hand gestures and presumably inaccurate online translation, he warned me to keep an eye on my belongings because of “evil spirits”. Slightly baffled, I decided to spend most of my time outside of the hostel. I found a billiard club and played a few frames with the proprietor. He was very skilful. A few teenagers came in to watch and smoke cigarettes.

Back at the hostel, I discovered that I had been banned from using the Alipay app. I had heard that this was common for foreigners, noting that I had to scan my passport to set it up. This was potentially a big issue because it is the dominant payment method, although I did have the WeChat app as a back-up. I asked two Chinese guys in my dorm room for help – they suggested visiting the

local police station (I managed to fix it before this was needed). I mentioned that I was from Manchester and they spoke about the first Chinese player in the English Premier League, Sun Jihai, having played for Manchester City. I felt safe and relaxed, with the “evil spirits” a distant memory.

09/02/2024

Today I took the 2-hour local bus to the stunning Yungang Grottoes, a collection of caves containing 5th Century Buddhist carvings, niches and painted Buddas. Bullet marks were visible, caused by the Red Guards, a student-led paramilitary social movement mobilized by Mao. On the bus, I was spotted by Jack, a Chinese tour guide who spoke good English. I told him I was British, and he mentioned the anti-immigration protests that were ongoing at the time in the UK. I asked for his source of international news and he showed me the BBC World Service podcast which he listens to religiously. It is not difficult for locals to bypass China’s ‘Great Firewall,’ which is supposed to block access to anti-PRC news organisations; the BBC is blocked because it has extensively reported on the Uyghur detention centres in Xinjiang. Jack thought the riots were tarnishing Britain’s image. This made me think about the enforcement of social cohesion in China, which blocks far-right riots and calls for religious freedoms in the same way. Jack helped me buy a ticket and told me some facts about the site. I was wondering if he would ask for money, but, as in Beijing, he just wanted to get to know me. Subconsciously, my usual traveller’s guard dropped, allowing for organic interactions for the rest of my trip. Ironically, the success of capitalist economic policies under the CCP allowed me to discuss politics more freely, because I wasn’t worried about being exploited.

Pingyao

10/02/2024

Before boarding the train to Pingyao, my passport was inspected by a number of confused China Railway bureaucrats. They hurried around to make sure I made the train before it left. The issue was that I had a standing ticket. I started to get exasperated, until the conductor said she’d find me a seat in the catering cabin! Uniformed officials seem to genuinely want to help; perhaps the distinction between official and civilian is less significant here.

At dinner, a Chinese guy in the next table showed me his 48% ABV rice wine while gesturing to my 3% ABV beer. We laughed. He laughed hysterically and offered me a cigarette, a gift that locals regularly offered to me.

11/02/2024

Like many rural areas in China, Pingyao was undergoing rapid economic development, with many streets lined with partially constructed buildings and bustling with busy builders. To get a feel for the development, I left the walled city of Pingyao for a 1.5 hour walk to the 6th Century Buddhist Shuanglin Temple. Three separate people offered me a ride on their motorbike. One was an older Chinese gentleman who could not speak English – he pulled up beside me and waited until we locked eyes. People are very generous towards foreigners.

At the Temple, I heard a voice say “Harry Maguire” in a funny voice, in my direction. I was wearing an England football shirt, and the comment relates to an internet video in which clips of Harry Maguire playing football poorly is accompanied by someone saying Harry Maguire in a funny voice. This niche cultural reference came from Benjamin, a young Chinese man who was also travelling. We initially chatted about football, with the typical chat about Sun Jihai. Benjamin lives in Wuhan, working as a security guard on the Wuhan Metro. As with my chat with Jack, Benjamin led the conversation towards politics by mentioning the railway strikes in Britain. Here is a reconstruction of our conversation based on my notes, and in spite of the language barrier:

Jacob: Could you go on strike?
 Benjamin: No, because we would be sacked. But there is no reason for us to strike.
 Jacob: Have you never had any grievances at work?
 Benjamin: Yes. [Some time in the past] we were working unpaid overtime, because of the time spent finishing our duties in preparation for leaving. This took us over the 40 hour working week limit, after which were working unpaid overtime. We highlighted the situation with our manager, who solved the issue.
 Jacob: In some cases it may be difficult for your manager to resolve your issues. The British railway workers are striking over pay, because of high inflation.
 Benjamin: We do not have inflation, and everyone is paid the same in the same job anyway [I think he was trying to say that one should get a better job if they want more money].

[Benjamin moved the conversation on by asking about my thoughts on democracy. I returned the question]

Benjamin: I think democracy is good up to a point; it can lead to extreme views.
[I asked a question around whether the lack of democracy in China is good, and whether the government of China is good. I use the term "good" to avoid language issues].
 Benjamin: I don't believe in categorising governments or systems as good or bad. The powerful and strong will rise to power and there is no point in trying to dispute this. The world will progress with powerful people and parties leading, regardless of my opinion. Do you think America is good or bad?
 Jacob: [Playing devil's advocate] Bad.
 Benjamin: America is neither good nor bad. It is strong.
 Jacob: What do you think of the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations and massacre?
 Benjamin: We have a Chinese saying: the bad stories get out while the good stories stay at home.
 Jacob: Do the territories of Hong Kong and Taiwan belong to the PRC?
 Benjamin: Yes, because they have Chinese blood. The protestors in Hong Kong believe they are British, but really they are victims of British colonisation. Indeed, they can leave if they don't feel Chinese. In the case of Taiwan, even the UN believes that Taiwan is PRC territory.
 Jacob: But this is because China, being a permanent member of the Security Council, has pressured the rest of the UN to prevent Taiwan joining. Do you think Taiwan should be allowed into the UN?
 Benjamin: It doesn't matter what I think.
 Jacob: Will China invade Taiwan?
 Benjamin: There will be no war, because Taiwanese people have Chinese blood, and we would not kill our own people.

This conversation was remarkable in many ways:

- I did not lead the conversation until we were firmly discussing politics. Western media suggests Chinese citizens are too scared to discuss politics for fear of retribution; this was not my experience.
- We addressed the thoughts I had in Datong about the 'iron fist rule' of the CCP preventing extreme views, unlike in the UK where far-right anti-immigration protests were ongoing. People here value cohesion highly, possibly at the expense of freedom.
- Benjamin was apathetic to a number of political issues that I raised. He refused to express an opinion on good or bad, which I wanted to use as a proxy to understand his political beliefs. His refusal to answer was itself fascinating. I felt that Benjamin was genuinely apathetic as opposed to unwilling to express opinion, given he initiated the conversation. possibly because China is an emerging superpower that has lifted a significant proportion of

its population out of poverty. Why call for political change when things are generally good? Or perhaps he truly believed that talking about politics is futile, since the powerful will rule regardless of public opinion. This perspective reminds me of a quote from Mao's *Little Red Book*, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."

We headed back to Pingyao, with Benjamin offering me a lift in his taxi. I was pleased we could still hang out, as the earlier conversation was a little heated at times. He refused my contribution to the taxi fare.

12/08/2024

Today I visited Mien Shan, a mountain in a city called Jiexiu. I took a short train ride from Pingyao and then the local bus to the base of the mountain. A compulsory coach ride to the summit was included in my ticket. On the bus I sat next to Yuhao, a Chinese teenager who was very excited to meet a foreigner. He practised his English by chatting about horse riding and cycling, and introduced me to his grandparents. He told me he needs to get a job so he can afford to take a girl out; I smiled, thinking that the trials and tribulations of teenage life are the same in all corners of the globe. Yuhao suggested becoming friends on WeChat; he still messages me, months after returning home.

All of the tourists were domestic. They chose to ride the bus to either end of the summit. Visiting a mountain to ride a bus to the summit and then a bus around the summit felt like the archetypal capitalist day out. I seemed to be the only person that fancied the hour-long walk to the other end of the summit. I was rewarded by finding the Former Site of the Anti-Japanese Democratic Government in Jiexu, founded in 1938. I translated every placard. Chinese political leaders spread communist thought after May 4th Movement, which was an anti-imperialist political movement opposing Chiang Kai-Shek's weak response to the land concessions included in the Treaty of Versailles. The museum featured speeches, declarations and details of committees formed by the Red Army, emphasising its strongly anti-Japanese (or anti-imperialist) positions. I thought back to *Red Star Over China*, in which over half of the interviews with senior CCP officials centred on anti-Japanese resistance, not communism (although anti-imperialism is typically associated with communism). The position of the CCP was to work with the Kuomintang to fight the Japanese invaders; political difference must make way for national liberation. With atrocities such as over 200,000 civilians murdered by the Japanese during the Nanjing Massacre, I understood why this was a message that people could get behind. However, I began to see the CCP as a nationalist force after visiting this museum. The combination of hope offered by the Red Army when villages were liberated from warlords, along with a strong message of national salvation backed by a concrete plan devised by the CCP, seems strongly attractive to the starving Chinese villager. I began to see China with a new lens.

Back at the hostel, the friendly English-speaking female owner, Hai Yan, was wearing a tight black dress, heels and a full face of makeup. I complimented her and asked if she was going on a night out. She says she had to work. She said she would like to go out to dance, but her husband prefers for her to stay at home. I think back to the museum, which decorated many female members of the Anti-Japanese Democratic Government in Jiexu.



Me and Hai Yan.

Nanjiecun/Luoyang

16/08/2024

I decided to take a detour on my journey from Luoyang to Xi'an, by stopping at the village of Nanjiecun (sometimes known as Nanjie). It is commonly reported as being the last Maoist village in China because it collectivised in 1986. At this time, the rest of the country were doing the opposite because of market reforms (encouraging private ownership of capital) put forward by former leader Deng Xiaoping. All capital in the village is owned by the Nanjie Village Group. Members of the village work in various factories, making instant noodles and beer that, ironically, can be bought in the UK from Tesco. I used an app to call a taxi to the town square, where portraits of Marx, Engels,

Lenin and Stalin surround a large stone bust of Mao. Communist music and speeches blared out of a speaker. A Chinese tourist sarcastically raised a fist, while shouting and laughing to friends. He was not fearful of showing disrespect.



The town square of Nanjicun. Left to right: Marx, Engels, Mao (stone), Lenin, Stalin.

I walked around the clean streets, finding a billboard which listed village expenditure (food, energy, medical etc.). Placards were plentiful, placed even on the residential apartment blocks to explain the communal living situation (every family receives a private apartment with a choice of larger or smaller layout). Was I in a model village?

I visited two shops that both appeared to cater more for tourists than locals. The budget for wages is said to be 30% of business revenue, so locals do have some autonomy to spend. The woman in the first shop was not eager to talk, suggesting I visit the visitors' centre. She did tell me that she likes it here. In the second shop, I bought some famous Nanjicun instant noodles and sat outside to eat them. A worker in the shop came out to chat to me after I had briefly spoken to her about Nanjicun (she said it has great social programmes). She was a 29-year-old shop assistant. Her opening question was "Are iPhone cheap in your country?" She asked me about food in my country; whether we eat hamburgers often; told me that she would love to travel to the UK and the US but is worried about getting lost; and if "there was an epidemic in your area three years ago, with many people suffering from colds and fevers." I found it odd that she was not aware that Covid had spread worldwide. She pointed to Italian wine in the shop, and I said my stepmother is Italian. She was confused with the term stepmother. Once I explained that divorce is common in my country, she said the UK is "very bad" for this. I thought it best not to mention that my parents had never married. She asked if British men pay "bride dowries" (money paid by a groom to his bride and her family). She described at great length the money, cars, houses and household appliances that

grooms give to brides in Southern China. She said that Chinese men are wealthy. I said that this is misogynistic; she called over a friend to read this translated word on my phone and they giggled. I tried to press her on why she does not leave the village, for travel or work. I also asked if she is allowed to leave. A little frustrated, she said, "We can also go out and play, and we can also visit different countries. As I just said, the socialism here is very good. We like it here very much. I don't have a job [despite serving me in the shop]. I have never gone out of town to work. I have always been in Nanjie."

I felt a tinge of sadness – she was curious about the world, having asked me various questions about my life and country, and explicitly said that she wanted to travel. Was she toeing the line? I ended by asking about the negatives of living here. She did not give me any. She said she did not know about the 12-hour study sessions that are reported to be punishment. I let her watch while I copied some text from the internet about alleged corporal punishment in Nanjicun into the translation software. She said "no, no," walked off and then came back to say she had to work. I asked for a picture together; she laughed and refused, implying that she is not pretty enough by saying "beautiful" in English. I was pleased that she could still laugh with me. The whole conversation was highly ironic. We spoke extensively about capitalist values, and she clearly valued material goods. She also wanted to visit the current capitalist superpower (the US) and the birthplace of the modern capitalist world (the UK). Nanjicun, with its people who value materialism and its goods which are sold to global markets, was a place of contradiction.

Xi'an

17/08/2024

Having committed to cycling to Yan'an, I set out on my first day in Xi'an to buy a bike. China is not full of old bikes, as I discovered in Beijing, so I had to trawl the streets for hours to find a suitable second-hand bike. In China and many Asian countries, shops are clustered based on the goods they sell. I found the bike shop street by chance, which housed shops selling almost exclusively new bikes. At the bottom of the street, a group of elderly men were flogging their ancient and battered second hand bikes. Just what I wanted! I had a laugh with the men. I pointed out that one cheap bike had a fake 'Giant' (luxury bike brand) sticker stuck on the frame; the men found that hilarious. I did some haggling and test cycles but nothing stuck. I went around the corner and found a bike workshop with a couple of second-hand bikes and spotted a well-used (genuine) blue Giant. It was rusty and too small for me, but I was in love. It was £33, including some repairs and a rear pannier rack. As the British tabloid press termed after photographing Jeremy Corbyn cycling in London, this was to be my 'Maoist bicycle.' The mechanics laughed when I said I would cycle it to Yan'an.

19/08/2024

This morning I exchanged text messages with someone I met in Nanjicun. He was from a surrounding village. He told me that "there are too many people in China and the wages are low. Most people work...10 hours. There's no time to do what you love."

The World Snooker Tour, the global professional snooker circuit, happened to have a tournament in Xi'an. I managed to get a ticket and watched elite players such as Mark Selby and Kyren Wilson play. A Chinese man outside asked if I could bring him in, offering money to me. He said he was not able to buy a ticket; did he lack an ID card?

While taking my bike for further repairs, I met Ryan, a young Chinese man with a bike worth thousands of pounds. He could speak a little English and helped communicate the issues with my bike to the mechanic. He invited me for dinner, so we headed to his apartment. I couldn't believe my eyes when I entered his two-bedroom high-rise apartment: American flag on the wall, figurines of American cartoon characters, 70-inch Sony TV with PlayStation, and cockpit racing simulator system. It was the dream mancave. Every piece of technology he owned was imported, from the Siemens refrigerator to the Dyson Hoover. He mentioned having an Audi sports car and Ducati motorbike. I was suspicious until we headed down to the garage. I sat in the Audi and turned down his request for me to drive it. An hour with Ryan was long enough to understand Deng Xiaoping's capitalist market reforms, termed "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics". We ate a delicious dinner of barbequed lamb and beef, a Xi'an delicacy. Ryan ordered every Chinese soft drink at the restaurant for me to try, which made me feel a little queasy. We discussed travel and sports. He refused my contribution to the cost of dinner. I was very grateful of his generosity.



Left: Me and Ryan. Right: Me in Ryan's unbelievable apartment.

Earlier in the day, a group of three Chinese high school students helped me find rope to tie my bag onto my bike. We took a selfie, which they later shared on social media (WeChat) with the following caption (translated): "The China-UK exchange was successfully completed, complying with and implementing Xi Jinping's concept of a community with a shared future for mankind." They were sarcastically, or even openly mocking, Xi Jinping's foreign policy slogan, "Community of common destiny for mankind." Schoolchildren are not scared of mocking politicians, even on social media.

Part II: Cycle from Xi'an to Yan'an

21/08/2024 – Day 1

Today I set off on my cycle! The plan was no more than:

1. Book a hotel roughly 50km from my current location towards Yan'an.
2. Cycle to the hotel, with help from the Chinese navigation app Amap.
3. Book another hotel and repeat.

I felt a little apprehensive because this was a big step into the unknown. Would I find a nice road to cycle on? Are rural areas safe? Will my mighty Giant bike hold up? Would there be phone signal? I would have been snookered without access to my phone. Only 357km to go!



Leaving Xi'an!

The majority of the cycle was spent leaving Xi'an. I was used to Chinese roads by now, having cycled or rode a motorbike in every place I visited. Other than at traffic lights, road rules are rather fluid. Cars pull into new lanes into the smallest of gaps and do not stop when flying around corners, so everyone is conditioned to look out for danger at every moment. This gave me a curious sense of safety.

I cycled through quaint villages and pristine paddy fields. This was the traditional China that I wanted to see. I noticed old women crouching to tend to rice crops while young men stood above them. I got lost a couple of times but the cycle was successful! My cycle was not overly strenuous, and my cycling shorts from home ensured a comfortable ride.

Day 1

Starting Point: Xi'an

End point: Chengguan Town, Sanyuan County

Distance: 58.4km

Total time: 4hr 40 minutes

Top speed: 23 km/h

Repairs: 0

21/08/2024 – Day 2

In Xi'an I bought a small satchel bag to carry clothes during my cycle. I cut the strap off, clipped the flap to my pannier rack and tied the whole thing to the bike with rope. The pannier rack also had a sprung flap which clamped the bag into place and secured my phone. This was a lame solution; I had to constantly stop to get my phone out for directions. My exposed phone and I got very hot given I cycled right through the mid-afternoon sun.

Unfortunately, the cycle today was miserable. I realised that the navigation app prioritises speed over scenery after cycling along hard shoulders of five-lane motorways for most of the day. I



stopped off to buy an apple from a hawkker who was resting on the hard shoulder. He was a happy older gentleman, who said that “we are in Fuping County, Xi Jinping’s hometown.” The apple was firm but juicy. Delicious!

On the motorway hard shoulder! Chinese men would often relax with their shirt unbuttoned.

I translated a billboard which listed the Socialist Core Values: prosperous (sic), democracy civilisation, harmonious, free, equality, just, rule of law, patriotic, dedication, integrity and friendly.

I was relieved to get off the bike and into the hotel. I resolved to find a new route and promptly discovered a road that goes all the way to Yan'an from Xi'an. This was the G210, which spans the length of China, from Inner Mongolia to Guangxi.

Day 2

Starting Point: Chengguan Town, Sanyuan County

End point: Tongchuan

Distance: 62.7km

Total time: 6hr 5 minutes

Top speed: 43 km/h

Repairs: 0

22/08/2024 – Day 3

The receptionist helped me to crack walnuts this morning. We laughed over the hassle and my incompetence, with her doing most of the work.

The cycle today was eventful, difficult and beautiful. The first hour featured relentless climbs. I felt weak, so I stopped to eat a large plate of scrambled eggs and rice. I cycled on further, before stopping at a public toilet; rural and urban areas always have plenty of free public toilets in China. I returned to my bike to find a flat tyre. I saw a man floating around as I entered the toilet and suspected he sabotaged my bike, but this was probably the tiredness talking. I found a small shop and asked for help, given I did not have any tools let alone a puncture repair kit. Fortunately, the shopkeeper happened to have everything I needed in his lock-up next door. I took the wheel off and removed the inner tube, and he did the rest with help from a tyre mechanic from the end of the road. He refused my money and sent me on my way. Was I just unbelievably lucky to find someone helpful? Anyone who has visited China will understand that, like nowhere else I have visited, people are exceptionally friendly and helpful. The shopkeeper did not even take much interest in my travels; he simply felt a duty to help me.

I was significantly delayed after the events this morning. I was now into the difficult part of the ride, as I had discovered that the G210 was effectively a mountain pass. I was cycling over the Loess Plateau. Loess is a clastic sediment composed of wind-blown silt and clay. The climbs were not so steep, but they were persistent. I cycled at walking pace for long periods, rueing the decision to buy an old, heavy bike and cycle it on a less direct route. The fierce afternoon sun did not help. I persisted and was rewarded with rolling hills and paddy fields. I stopped a few times and thought about the English countryside.

I stopped at a tourist attraction in Younihe that was still being built. This was described as a “residence of Zhou Enlai”, the PRC’s first Premier. In reality, he visited once when his car was unable to proceed on a journey between Xi’an and Yan’an! A local farmer was said to have helped carry the party’s belongings with a cow. The cow died and “the farmer thought we [Zhuo] would walk away without caring about his loss like the Kuomintang army, and he fell to the ground in fear.” Enlai instructed his men to pay the farmer, who was incredibly grateful. Some onlookers were “moved to tears”. This story strengthened my populist assessment of the CCP; this story of questionable accuracy is useful CCP propaganda. I also began to recognise that I had been charmed by the stories of kindness and bravery in *Red Star Over China*, particularly in descriptions of the liberation of villages from warlords and the Long March. Any movement, be it religious, sporting or political, relies on emotionally engaging its followers to ensure dedication.

I arrived at my destination at 6.30pm, finishing with a lovely downhill run into a mountain town. I was in the middle of nowhere but had arrived in a thriving town and holiday destination with astonishing views! The hotel had clocks showing the time in London, New York, Beijing, Tokyo and Paris. They were all wrong.

In my room, I had undressed and turned on the shower when I heard a banging on my door. I tried to get dressed quickly, but the impatient people outside continued to knock. I opened the door to find two policemen typing questions into translation software. Hotels must register foreign tourists with the local police, which must have been how they found me. They asked to see my passport, where I had been, where I was going and when my Visa expired. I relaxed when they suggested a tourist attraction in the area. They were very friendly and wished me an enjoyable time in China. I messaged a Chinese friend back home who agreed that the police are very friendly; he said they are more like “community mediators”.

Day 3

Starting Point: Tongchuan

End point: Chengguan Village, Yijun County

Distance: 47.1km

Total time: 6hr 29 minutes

Top speed: 49 km/h

Repairs: 1 (puncture)

23/08/2024 – Day 3

I felt fit and fresh having overcome the difficulties of yesterday. I descended quickly towards the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor, which was recommended by the police officers. About halfway down, the rubber from my front brake pad fell off while I was braking sharply. I managed to come to a stop using the barely working back brakes. I picked up the piece of rubber, without which I could not brake very effectively. I cycled on and found a small workshop, where a man lent me some tools. I hammered the brake pad back into the metal holder, and my brakes worked again! Having successfully repaired my bike, I felt unstoppable. This feeling lasted half an hour; the same pad fell off again.



The mighty Giant (without front right brake pad) looking over the Loess Plateau. Local Government has invested in technology to prevent soil erosion, meaning the landscape is reasonably green.

At the Mausoleum, a placard compared an ancient tree with the revitalisation of China, one of many examples in Chinese museums where fanciful meaning is derived from things that are entirely meaningless.

I paid roughly 30p at a market stall for a new brake pad and labour. I headed towards the hotel, which was a surprisingly flat route given the amount I had descended that morning. The hotel was in an industrial town; a presumably coal-fired power station pumped out gases day and night. I had

to accompany the hotel owner to the local police station, so they could ask me questions and photocopy my passport. This was a time-consuming formality.

This evening, I began to show signs of an allergic reaction. My throat felt tight, so I decided to find a local hospital. The hospital in the town appeared to be closed – I knocked on the receptionist's window but she refused to serve me. A friend I had made at dinner found me a taxi that would take me to an open hospital. The taxi driver kindly presented his ID card so I could enter the hospital, and I paid the £30 entrance fee. This covered my treatment, which consisted of a simple examination and an IV drip. I was possibly also suffering with dehydration. I discovered that hospital treatment is only available to those with an ID card. I slept in the hospital this evening.

Day 4

Starting Point: *Chengguan Village, Yijun County*

End point: *Jiaokouhe Town, Luochuan*

Distance: 51.3km

Total time: 4hr 10 minutes

Top speed: >50km/h

Repairs: 2 (front break pad)

24/08/2024 – Day 4

Today I did not cycle, instead focusing on recovery after the events of last night. I took a taxi back to the hotel to get my bike and another taxi to a nicer hotel. I consumed electrolyte drinks and watched the snooker.

Day 4

Taxi between two hotels in Jiaokouhe Town, Luochuan

25/08/2024 – Day 5

Fully hydrated, I set out determined to finish what I had started. I stumbled upon the site of the Luochuan Conference, where the CCP agreed to Mao's insistence on the need for total victory against the Japanese invasion, not just sporadic resistance as the Kuomintang had attempted. Mao wrote up propaganda which emphasised the Kuomintang's suppression of a "patriotic people's army" that could have fought against European imperialism that led to land concessions (such as Qingdao). Another example of nationalist ideas in the CCP.

My brake pad fell off for the third time this afternoon as I descended into the final stop before Yan'an. I checked into the hotel and found a bike shop for another 30p repair job.

The rain thrashed down while I ate dinner under an umbrella at an outdoor market. I met a group of lads who were university students and roughly my age. They were boisterous and made juvenile jokes, just like my friends and I at home. I visited the gaming café with them, enjoying basketball and shooting games. One lad could speak English fairly well, and told me his English name with a big smile on his face. The 'name' was a common British profanity. He also mentioned liking the British TV show Shameless.

Day 5

Starting Point: *Jiaokouhe Town, Luochuan*

End point: *Beijiaochang, Fucheng*

Distance: ~60km

Total time: Not tracked

Top speed: Not tracked

Repairs: 1 (front brake pad)

26/08/2024 – Day 6

I felt strong and confident today. By now, I understood what I needed to do in a day's cycle: eat a large breakfast, stop at every opportunity to buy water, drink double the amount of water I think I need and eat sugary snacks.

The road was mostly flat today; the G210 snaked through mountains which guided me to Yan'an. I stopped more regularly to savour the view, given that this was the final ride of my journey. The mountains were gorgeously green with yellow loess peeking out here and there. I was grateful of the efforts of the local government in investing in technology to prevent soil erosion, meaning the landscape is green.



I was in the middle of nowhere

I cycled past another 'bikepacker' – a young Chinese lad with the same bike plus pannier set-up as me. Our eyes met, and we exchanged grins and waved. Was he heading to Xi'an?

I stopped off to eat Oreos beside a seemingly large town. Multiple apartment blocks sat in the middle of miles of undeveloped land. There were no cars or people entering or exiting the town. This highlighted the inherent challenges of combining one-party rule with free-market policies — local government officials must drive economic growth to improve their party rank, often encouraging development in areas where it's unnecessary.

The road into Yan'an seemed never-ending. But I powered through and made it!



I made it!

I expected a feeling of euphoria, but relief and tiredness dominated. Looking back, I am proud of my resilience and grateful of the memories I have made.

Day 6

Start Point: Beijiaochang, Fucheng

End point: Yan'an

Distance: 77.2km

Total time: Not tracked

Top speed: Not tracked

Repairs: 0

Yan'an (27th – 31st August 2024)

When the Red Army finished its year-long, 1000km Long March, which was a retreat from the advancing Kuomintang forces in the Jiangxi Soviet during the Chinese Civil War, two soviets were established in the prefecture-level city of Yan'an. One soviet was at Bao'an, where Edgar Snow stayed when writing *Red Star Over China*. By 1937, the soviets were amalgamated into the Yan'an Soviet, which was the CCP headquarters until Yan'an was taken by the Kuomintang in 1947. The CCP did not have a fixed base after this point, until they took Beijing and formed the PRC in 1949.

Yan'an had a few museums covering the history of the CCP:

Yan'an Revolution Museum

I certainly understood the Chinese Communism after visiting the revolutionary museum – a stone bust of Mao presided over a large Coca-Cola advert at the entrance.



Mao is in the centre, presiding over a Coca-Cola advert (red text on a white banner).

The museum presents an excellent, if one-sided, account of the CCP's time in Yan'an and the Sino-Japanese War. I liked how open the CCP are in highlighting their intentions, despite the seemingly negative connotations – it was written that the media wing had a policy of "seeking truth from facts." It was also written, in Chinese, that Mao felt democracy would stop the government from slacking and failing after the original CCP leaders die. It was surprising that the failure to achieve democracy was so openly addressed, especially during a time of growing discontent in China.

I met a Chinese university student at the museum. He asked me what I understand about communism, and he said he learnt this stuff in school. I said that some people in the UK would highlight that Mao caused the deaths of 60 million people. He disagreed and said Mao is the reason China is so great. We agreed that Mao would disagree with the current Chinese economy.

Xinhua News Museum

The Xinhua News Agency is the official state news agency of the PRC. It started in Yan'an, following the 'Marxism news concept'. The museum celebrated the great efforts of the original journalists in the face of adversity. They built cave dwellings in the day and wrote at the night. Before the founding of the PRC, Xinhua News Agency had offices in London, Prague and Hong Kong. The museum used the term 'propaganda' on multiple placards; the agency's intentions were not hidden.

The remaining museums repeated much of the same information as the Yan'an Revolution Museum. I did some hiking and reading as I had probably given myself too much time in Yan'an.

On my final day, I managed to give my bike away. I tried to give it to people who appeared to be homeless, but they did not want it. Perhaps they were confused, scared or thought they were being scammed. A Chinese man who spoke some English offered to translate, but ended up taking the bike himself. He was a tourist to Yan'an, so I don't know what he was planning with the mighty Giant.



The proud owner of the mighty Giant.

On my final evening in Yan'an before heading back to Xi'an, I ate dinner at a street stall. A man was cooking a meal that looked like porridge in a very aggressive but entertaining fashion. He would hammer the pan with a thick wooden stick to knead the mixture, while laughing and shouting orders at people to video him. He found out that I was English and would say "English" before slamming the stick against the mixture, to great amusement from the crowd. I was probably the butt of the joke, but it was all in good jest. The dish was qiumei, grain mixed with water, served with a spicy sauce and chopped herbs.



I believe the act was being recorded by the chef for TikTok

Return to Xi'an and Beijing

I took the train back to Xi'an and met up with Ryan again for dinner. We enjoyed another delicious Xi'an barbeque, this time consisting of beef, mutton and fish that had been barbequed on metal skewers. We discussed the one child policy, and he said that women deserve reproductive rights. He asked why the Western media slander China, and he said that we are all sharing the world and so should be friends. This sounded like Xi Jinping's "community of common destiny for mankind" foreign policy slogan that I encountered with the schoolchildren when I was last in Xi'an. Ryan refused my contribution to the bill. I hope I can stay friends with him and everyone else I met in China!

I took the sleeper train back to Beijing. I finally managed to correctly book for Tiananmen Square and the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong. His embalmed body was dressed in a green Red Army uniform and draped with a red blanket bearing the hammer and sickle symbol.

On my final evening in China, I queued for an hour at a highly rated Peking duck restaurant. It was well worth it. There was a Bian Lian show in the restaurant, which is a Chinese dramatic art. The performers wear vividly coloured masks which they change instantaneously with the swipe of a fan. I felt very privileged to have stumbled upon this exceptionally skilled performance. It was the perfect end to a once-in-a-lifetime trip.

Summary of my thoughts

Here is a brief summary of my thoughts about the CCP and China today:

- I was astounded by the friendliness of everyone that I met. Even from tour guides, who did not expect money unlike what I had encountered in other parts of the world. People felt a duty to help travellers in their country, and many wished me a great time in their “beautiful land”.
- Technology is used to access all services in China, from making payments to accessing toilet paper by watching adverts. It could be used for surveillance, data collection, or to restrict the freedoms of opponents of the state. The same can be said for the requirement of ID cards to access places of interest, mobile payment software and medical facilities.
- Many Chinese people are still fascinated by tourists, especially outside of Beijing - I was asked for many pictures and people would push their kids towards me so they could practise English. This is despite China’s status as an emerging superpower and global hegemon.
- In my experience, the official/civilian distinction is less pronounced. The police officers that I met were friendly and railway workers wanted to help. People seemed to occasionally disobey the police, such as by cycling through red lights in Beijing.
- Political discussion is possible. I met people who would discuss sensitive issues and policies, such as Benjamin and Ryan. People are not scared of the alleged repercussions.
- Social cohesion is highly valued and, in many ways, has led to a less fractious society (at least for certain ethnic groups).
- People seem apathetic (Benjamin) or unwilling to address some political issues (Benjamin and the university student I met in the Yan’an Revolutionary Museum).
- Even in the export-oriented, tourist-focussed final Maoist commune, China is largely capitalist. The state controls many industries and has a stake in most companies, but the economy is run on a for-profit basis. Western corporations have significant access to Chinese markets. However, it is clear that living standards are good for many people, especially when compared with countries that were also previously colonised (e.g. India).
- The CCP was essentially a nationalist force. Anti-Japanese governments, such as the one in Jiexu, worked closely with the CCP, which itself would promote a patriotic message. National liberation was important for the poor peasant, who had witnessed massacres (e.g. in Nanjing) and warlords leeching from the starving peasant. People got behind the anti-Japanese and national liberation message, which was a powerful propaganda tool.
- I found the CCP acknowledging its propaganda tools and failure to enact democracy in museums.
- Fantastical stories are effective tools of propaganda. Appealing to people’s emotions through these stories is an effective way to keep followers. I realised that I had been charmed by these stories at times.
- Reasonable public hospital treatment was available if you had an ID card.

I was incredibly lucky to have an exciting and unique experience in such an amazing country. I would again like to thank David and Lois Sykes, and all of the interesting, kind and generous locals that I met along the way. I would especially like to thank Andrei and his wife, Jack, Hai Yan,

Benjamin, the woman I met in Nanjicun, Ryan, my friend in Jiaokouhe Town, and the lads I met in Fucheng.

Advice for future travellers in China:

- WeChat is key for making friends and mobile payments. Alipay is key for mobile payments and a whole range of other services. Try to set these up before you arrive.
- Amap (aka Gaode Maps) is very useful for directions and public transport.
- The Trip.com app is the best app for booking hotels and trains. There is a small fee, so you could choose to buy tickets at the station.
- Use a screen translation app which will be useful when using the apps above.
- Buy a SIM card. They are slightly more expensive at the airport, but I was personally fortunate to find the help of locals to buy one on the street. With internet access, getting around will be easy.
- A VPN is needed to access a lot of the internet. Mullvad or LetsVPN worked well.
- Use Google translate with a VPN to talk to people. I regularly conducted conversations with it.
- Talk to people! China is the safest place I have visited, so say “yes” to invites for dinner and embrace conversations.
- The Lonely Planet guidebook is very useful if you want to get off the beaten track.
- Visit Hai Yan’s hostel in Pingyao, the Pingyao Jiaxin Guesthouse.

Jacob Christianson (MChem Chemistry, 2020)

Feel free to contact me with comments or questions via the Univ Development Office.