



In the land of pandas and hand-rolled noodles

SHAER REAZ

A fading yellow line separates the growing throng of people behind me from entry into the People's Republic of China. In front, a screen on a machine beckons me to step forward and place my passport on the scanner. Two seconds later, the machine barks at me in robotic Bangla—"Apnar paach angul prodorshan korun abong doya kore shamne takan". While my biometrics are entered into the system, a camera ominously flashes a red light at my face.

What follows the biometric clearance is an hour-long shuffle across an immigration line that rivals Bangladesh's in every way, as stony faced immigration police ponder over passports and take a second round of biometric scans just to make sure you are who you say you are, approximately 20 feet from where you first made claims to your fingers and your face.

As dreary as the immigration process is, exiting Chengdu Shuangliu International Airport instantly puts a smile on your face. An obelisk at the centre of the parking lot reminds newcomers of Chengdu's specialty—here be giant pandas.

There's a weird rule in China that binds corporations to it—they have to find the best possible accommodation for guests, especially if they've been invited by the government. Something about putting forward the best possible image of the country. I had been invited to cover the Asia Pacific Innovation Day 2019 event, organised by global technology giant Huawei—the largest privately-owned entity in China. For the event, they lodged foreign journalists at the Waldorf Astoria Chengdu, a tower of glass and steel and lavish luxury that sits at a stark contrast with the history of the region.

There is an abundance of history, to say the least. Chengdu, the capital of the Sichuan province, sits on a valley surrounded by towering mountains that stretch across the breadth of Asia—west towards Nepal and Kazakhstan and north towards Mongolia. Chengdu has seen human inhabitation for nearly 4,000 years, and thrived

under the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties before finally being unified under the Qin dynasty. In the modern era, Chengdu saw rapid militarisation during World War II, with the defending armies having to move westward in the face of the invading Japanese—that militarisation sustained, and the region has served as the Western Theatre Command for the People's Liberation Army since the 1960s. Currently, Chengdu boasts a thriving economy that acts as a bridge between East and West—home to China's information, military, and agricultural powerhouses. It's a city that edly modern towering ho-centres and scale in-structure

like flyovers and sky-trains with ancient single-story wooden tea-houses across a sprawling landscape that never seems to end.

The city itself was never even meant to be this large. With no major river originally flowing through it, Chengdu lacked the lifeline of every major city for most of its humble beginnings. Around 256 BC (during the Zhou dynasty), the Qin state saw a feat of engineering divert an entire river—the Minjing—towards the Chengdu plains, where the city currently stands. Called the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, it's the world's oldest surviving irrigation system—built across Mount Qingcheng through a repeated process of heating up and cooling the rocks of the mountain.

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