Episode Book

EPISODE #6072

China Beyond Beijing and Shanghai: A Regional Guide

PUBLISHED	17 October 2026 at 18:04 UTC
DURATION	20:45
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/china-beyond-beijing-shanghai-73147/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	anthropic/claude-haiku-5.5
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.10
SOURCES	14 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:43 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Beijing and Shanghai are to China what New York and LA are to America — a fraction of the picture. This episode walks through all six traditional regions, from the dense eastern seaboard to the vast, sparsely populated west, and makes sense of why the country's people and money crowd onto one side of the map. Along the way: Tianjin, the megacity next door to Beijing that outsiders routinely forget; Harbin and Shenyang in the north-east rust belt; Suzhou, Hangzhou and Wuhan in the interior; and Chongqing, the largest city proper on Earth, which most Westerners have never heard of. Then there's the "second-tier" question — a tier system that isn't official at all, but is used constantly by media and investors. We look at Yicai Global's 2025 ranking of 338 cities and its fifteen "New Tier-1" names, including the city that's topped the list eleven years running. If you've been to Beijing and Shanghai and wondered what lies in between, this is the tour.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Right, so Daniel's asked for an idiot's guide to China. Not a history lecture, not a geopolitics seminar, just a whistle-stop tour of the country for someone who's been to Beijing and Shanghai and has no real idea what lies in between. He wants the regions, the big cities in each, the so-called second-tier cities that are secretly enormous, and which of them you can actually get to from the West without losing a week to connections.



Herman

And it's a good question to start from, because most Westerners really do know two cities in China. Beijing and Shanghai. Maybe Hong Kong if they're older. And that's a bit like knowing New York and Los Angeles and assuming you've seen America.



Corn

Except China's a continent pretending to be a country.



Herman

Yes. And the map explains almost everything, so let's start there. The single organising fact is that China's people and money are crammed onto the eastern side, and the west is enormous and almost empty. East China, the region that includes Shanghai, is about 832,000 square kilometres with roughly four hundred and seven and a half million people. That's about five hundred people per square kilometre. Western China is nearly five times the area, almost four million square kilometres, and holds about two hundred and ninety million people. That's seventy-three per square kilometre.



Corn

So the west is five times bigger and has less than three-quarters of the people.



Herman

Less than three-quarters of the people of the east, yes. And the physics of it is pretty simple. The eastern plains and the southern coast are fertile lowlands, so that's where the farming was, and then the trade, and then the factories. South of the Yangtze it turns hilly and mountainous. The west and north are basins, the Gobi, the Taklamakan, plateaus, and the Tibetan Plateau, which is high and cold and frankly not great for feeding anyone. And



Herman (continued)

the eighteen thousand kilometres of coastline is what fed the export machine that built the coastal core.



Corn

Hang on, let me push on that. Why does the coastline matter so much? Plenty of countries have coasts and don't end up with a manufacturing machine.



Herman

Fair challenge. The coastline mattered because of cost. Shipping bulk goods by sea is dramatically cheaper than moving them overland across mountains and deserts. So a factory on the Pearl River Delta could import raw materials and export finished goods at a price that a factory in Gansu simply couldn't match. Once the first factories were built, the supply chains, the workers and the ports all reinforced each other. It's the same logic that built the industrial towns of northern England, just at a vastly larger scale.



Corn

And that feedback loop is the thing that's hard to unwind. Once the ports and the workforce cluster, every new factory has a reason to locate beside the last one.



Herman

It's agglomeration. The Pearl River Delta didn't become a manufacturing powerhouse because someone drew a plan. Dongguan and Shenzhen grew up around component suppliers, so a company making phones could source circuit boards, casings and packaging within a few kilometres of the assembly line. Move that factory to Gansu and you lose the suppliers, the engineers who know the trade, and the trucks that run on time. The west can offer cheaper land and labour, but it's trying to sell those advantages against a network that took decades to form.



Corn

So when people say China is huge, what they really mean is the bit that's full of people is smaller than people think.



Herman

That's a fair way of putting it. And it means the two questions this episode keeps coming back to are, what's actually out there beyond Beijing and Shanghai, and can you get to it?



Corn

Right. So let's walk the regions. Six of them, I gather, in the traditional carving-up.



Herman

Six, yes. Start in the north. North China takes in Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanxi and Inner Mongolia, about a million and eighty thousand square kilometres and a hundred and fifty-three million people. Beijing is the political capital everyone knows. But Tianjin, the port city next door, is a megacity in its own right, and Westerners routinely forget it exists.



Corn

Forgetting a city of over ten million is a skill.



Herman

It takes practice. Tianjin is also where Beijing's port access really comes from. Beijing is landlocked in the way that matters for trade, so Tianjin handles a big slice of the capital's shipping, and the two cities are increasingly planned as one region. Shanxi, just to the west, is the coal country, and Inner Mongolia is a vast stretch of grassland and desert that runs far beyond what most people picture when they hear the name. The north is where the capital's supplies come from, and it's also where a lot of the country's heavy energy infrastructure sits.

Then you go north-east, which is Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang and the eastern edge of Inner Mongolia. Around a hundred and twenty-one million people across a much larger area, so the density drops to about ninety-six per square kilometre. Harbin, Shenyang, Dalian, Changchun. This is the old heavy-industry heartland, the rust belt, and it's colder and culturally quite distinct from the coast.



Corn

I'll be honest, I'd have put the rust belt in America and not in China.



Herman

Everybody does. And it's worth noticing that the north-east industrial base is one of the places that's had the hardest time adjusting. The state-owned heavy industry that built it was restructured hard in the late nineties, and a lot of the workforce was laid off with little replacement. Harbin in winter is a good place to see that history in the architecture, the Russian-influenced old town sitting next to empty factory districts. Dalian, by contrast, has reinvented itself as a port and a tourist city with a much more open feel, so the region isn't uniformly stuck. The north-east is a useful reminder that a region can be important for a century and then have to work out what it is afterwards.
Then East China, which is the big one. Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Anhui, Jiangxi and Shandong. Four hundred and seven and a half million people, the densest and most populous region by a wide margin. Add Hangzhou, Suzhou, Nanjing, Qingdao, Ningbo, Hefei, Xiamen. This is where the money is and where the flights land.



Corn

So the bit most Western tourists already half-know is also the bit that holds the most people.



Herman

Yes. And it's worth knowing that Suzhou and Hangzhou are the places a lot of visitors wish they'd gone instead of Shanghai, because the canals and gardens and lakes are a much calmer version of the same region. Suzhou's classical gardens, some of which date back to the sixteenth century, are a good example. Hangzhou has West Lake, which has inspired poets for well over a thousand years, and is only a short train ride from Shanghai.
Then Central China, Henan, Hubei and Hunan, about two hundred and seventeen million people. Wuhan, Changsha, Zhengzhou. It's the interior but not the frontier. Huge populations, major domestic hubs, historically the crossroads of the country. Wuhan sits on the Yangtze and the Han, and it's been the junction of north-south and east-west routes for centuries. Changsha is famous for its food and for being Mao's home province, and Zhengzhou is a rail and logistics hub that handles an enormous amount of freight moving between the coast and the west.
South China is Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, plus Hong Kong and Macau. Guangzhou and Shenzhen and the whole Pearl River Delta manufacturing machine, plus the tropical island of Hainan.



Corn

And Hainan is the one that's basically a beach holiday, right?



Herman

It's the closest thing China has to a tropical resort province, with a free-trade zone that's been expanding and some very good beaches on the south coast, Sanya being the main one. It's an easy add-on from Guangzhou or Shenzhen, which is useful later. Guangxi, next door, is a different world again, with the karst limestone peaks around Guilin and Yangshuo that show up on so many of the classic landscape photographs. The Li River cruise is the thing people do there, and it's worth the early start.
And then the west, which is where the empty bit lives.



Corn

And the west is where the empty bit lives, which is almost four million square kilometres.



Herman

The west, which is almost four million square kilometres and nearly three hundred million people. Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Xinjiang. Chengdu, Chongqing, Xi'an, Kunming, Ürümqi, Lhasa. The dramatic landscapes live here, Tibet, Xinjiang, Yunnan. And so does the hardest travel. Xi'an is the home of the terracotta army and the old eastern end of the Silk Road. Kunming sits at a high altitude with a famously mild climate, which is why it's called the Spring City. Ürümqi is one of the most remote large cities on Earth, closer to Almaty than to Beijing. And I should say, I'm not sure about every boundary in that list, the provincial groupings get argued about, but that's the standard carving.



Corn

Give me the one I'd be most surprised by.



Herman

Chongqing. It's the largest city proper in the world, about thirty-one and a bit million people, the only one over thirty million. Bigger than most countries. And Westerners have barely heard of it. It was a separate municipality directly under the central government, and it's grown enormously as a manufacturing and logistics hub on the Yangtze. The city is famously hilly and foggy, built on a peninsula where two rivers meet, with a hotpot culture that's very much its own. Locals will tell you the fog is why the hotpot is so spicy, which is probably a joke, but the city does run on heat in more ways than one.



Corn

Bigger than most countries and nobody's heard of it. That's almost a branding failure.



Herman

It's a branding failure on a civilisational scale. And Chengdu, at around twenty-one million, is the anchor of the west and the gateway to Sichuan. It's the base for the giant pandas at the research base just outside the city, and it's the jumping-off point for the Sichuan mountains and the Jiuzhaigou valley. The city has a famously relaxed teahouse culture, and it's where a lot of the country's tech and game development has gathered in recent years. Harbin and Shenyang are the north-east's answer to a rust belt, culturally and climatically distinct from anything on the coast.



Corn

So that's the geography. Now, the question Daniel actually asked. Which of these are the so-called second-tier cities, and can you get to them?



Herman

And this is where I want to be careful, because the tier system is not official. The Chinese government publishes no list. It's a commercial construct, used by media, investors and marketers. The consensus Tier-1 four are Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Everything below that is a ranking, not an administrative fact.



Corn

So "second-tier" is what a magazine says it is.



Herman

Largely, yes. And that matters, because the same city can be second-tier in one ranking and first-tier in another. Hangzhou, for example, gets treated as a near-first-tier city by a lot of commentators because of the tech sector around Alibaba, even though it doesn't fit the classic four. The most useful one is Yicai Global's 2025 ranking, which scored three hundred and thirty-eight prefectural-level cities on things like commercial-resource concentration, hub function, resident vitality, lifestyle diversity and future dynamism. It named fifteen "New Tier-1" cities. In order: Chengdu, Hangzhou, Chongqing, Wuhan, Suzhou, Xi'an, Nanjing, Changsha, Zhengzhou, Tianjin, Hefei, Qingdao, Dongguan, Ningbo, Foshan. Chengdu has topped it for eleven years running. Hefei climbed four places to



Herman (continued)

eleventh in 2025.



Corn

Eleven years at the top and nobody in Ohio has heard of it.



Herman

I think that's the entire point of this episode, honestly. And the scale problem is what makes it striking. These "second-tier" cities are bigger than most countries. Chongqing thirty-one point nine million. Shanghai twenty-four point eight-seven. Beijing twenty-one point eight-six. Chengdu twenty-one point four. Guangzhou eighteen point eight-three. As of 2024 there are eighteen megacities, cities of over ten million, in China. Robert Lawrence Kuhn has a line that roughly a hundred and seventy Chinese cities have more than a million residents, and only five are considered first-tier. He argues the second-tier ones should be called "first-class opportunities."



Corn

That's a better name. Less like a tax bracket.



Herman

Much less like a tax bracket. Now, the reachability question, and this is where the picture has really moved. The visa regime has opened up enormously. The two-hundred-and-forty-hour visa-free transit policy, ten days, covers fifty-five countries as of June last year. That includes the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and most of Europe. You need a confirmed onward ticket to a third country, and you have to enter through one of about sixty open ports. China also reports visa-free access or mutual exemptions with seventy-five countries.



Corn

So the paperwork is the easy part now.



Herman

The paperwork is the easy part, and for a lot of travellers it's simple. You land in Shanghai, you take a fast train to Hangzhou, and you're in the second tier before lunch. The flights are the problem. China has two hundred and fifty-nine airports, thirty of which handle intercontinental flights. The big international gateways are Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, Shenzhen and Chengdu, together about half of all incoming international flights.



Corn

And I'm guessing the US is where it falls apart.



Herman

Badly. US–China flights are roughly a quarter of pre-pandemic levels. Around eighty-nine weekly nonstops now, against about three hundred and forty before. The bilateral cap is a hundred weekly, fifty each way. US–China passengers went from four point three million in 2019 to one point one million in 2024. And the fares have roughly doubled or tripled. Two to two and a half thousand dollars round trip in economy, where it used to be eight hundred to a thousand. Part of the reason is the Russian airspace closure, which adds time and cost for US carriers but not Chinese ones, since Chinese carriers can fly the more direct routes over that airspace.



Corn

So a New Yorker wanting to see Chengdu is looking at a pretty serious ticket.



Herman

The interior is the hardest part. Chongqing to Seattle, Hainan Airlines, launched in May 2024, one round trip a week. Xinhua calls it the only direct passenger route from China's central-west to Seattle. United has planned a San Francisco to Chengdu nonstop, about fourteen and a half hours, but it's seasonal and the route hasn't operated in four years. Xi'an has no current US nonstop at all. And Kunming has forty-nine nonstop origin airports, but they're almost all domestic or Asian. No Western long-haul.



Corn

You could fly from Kunming to almost anywhere in Asia and still not get home.



Herman

That's a fair summary, yes. Which is why the usual workaround is to connect through Seoul, Tokyo or Singapore, and then take a domestic leg in. It adds hours but it's often cheaper than the direct options. A typical itinerary might be New York to Seoul, then a short hop to Chengdu or Xi'an, which can end up cheaper and sometimes faster than routing through Beijing. Now from Europe it's much easier. Discounted fares reach Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Chongqing, Xi'an, Qingdao, Chengdu, Ningbo, Shenzhen and Lijiang, and some of them are quite cheap.



Corn

The practical upshot is that the east coast is where the flights land, and the west is where the good scenery is, and you have to connect through Beijing or Shanghai or Guangzhou, or through Seoul or Tokyo, to get to it.



Herman

Yes. Which is a perfectly good way to see the country, honestly. Do the east coast first because that's where the planes land, then push west as far as the connections allow. And the high-speed rail network does a lot of the heavy lifting once you're inside the country. Shanghai to Hangzhou is under an hour, Shanghai to Nanjing about an hour, Beijing to Tianjin about thirty minutes. You can cover a huge amount of the east in a week without ever touching a domestic flight. The rail network has spread inland too, so a traveller can get from Shanghai to Xi'an or Chengdu by train, though those journeys take a good deal longer than the coastal hops and it's worth planning them as an experience rather than a shortcut.



Hilbert

The Chongqing to Seattle thing. I once spent eleven days trying to get a freight forwarder in Chongqing to put a crate of mineral water on a train, and the whole thing hinged on a clerk who would only accept payment in the exact denominations of a banknote that had been withdrawn from circulation in the previous decade. Forty-two yuan, specifically. I had none. I drove to a shop in Guangzhou that dealt in old notes, and the man there had three of them in a biscuit tin, and he wanted the equivalent of a used Vauxhall for them. It was not a Vauxhall. It was a Vauxhall Astra with a cracked windscreen, and I'd bought it from a man in Dublin who said it had belonged to a bishop.



Corn

A bishop.



Hilbert

That's what he said. I don't think the bishop ever drove it. The water arrived at Seattle in the end, eleven days late, and the crate was still wet. That's not the point of it. The point is the notes were the actual constraint, not the aircraft.



Herman

I'm... I'm not sure how that connects to the flight capacity, but the notes thing is an interesting bottleneck.



Hilbert

It's the same bottleneck. You're only allowed so many of the thing through the door.



Corn

Closing, then. The open questions are whether the visa opening will eventually pull flight capacity back up, and whether the second-tier cities will ever shake the branding problem. Chongqing has thirty-one million people and nobody knows it's there. That's a marketing job nobody's getting paid for.



Herman

The whistle-stop tour in a sentence is the one we already said. East coast first, because that's where the planes land, then west as far as the connections allow. And Tibet, Xinjiang and Yunnan are a second trip, not a first one. They need more time, more permits in some cases, and a much higher tolerance for long journeys. Tibet in particular has a permit system for foreign visitors that changes, so it's worth checking well ahead of any plans.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed it, a review helps other people find us. You can find us at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

See you soon.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

1. **China State Council/NIA, 2025-06-12 . [primary]**
   https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/202506/content_7027405.htm

2. **Wikipedia, last edited 2026-10-09.**
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_regions_of_China

3. **Wikipedia, last edited 2026-10-17.**
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_China

4. **Wikipedia.**
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_city_tier_system

5. **Wikipedia, last edited 2026-09-10.**
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_in_China_by_population

6. **Yicai Global, 2025-05-28.**
   https://www.yicaiglobal.com/news/chengdu-hangzhou-13-others-rank-as-new-first-tier-chinese-cities-in-2025

7. **Sina/Kuaikeji, 2025-05-28 (2025 New Tier-1 and Tier-2 lists).**
   https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/roll/2025-05-28/doc-ineyayze8009086.shtml

8. **gov.cn, 2025-07-30 (75 countries visa-free).**
   https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202507/30/content_WS6889b01fc6d0868f4e8f48b9.html

9. **Shanghai government visa overview.**
   https://english.shanghai.gov.cn/en-Visa/20240110/b819846af2264c00862e5a352f62bde5.html

10. **The Points Guy (US**
    China flight capacity, fares, quotes).
    https://thepointsguy.com/news/china-flights-united-states-plummet/

11. **FlightConnections, page updated 2026-01-10.**
    https://www.flightconnections.com/flights-to-china-cn

12. **Xinhua/Chongqing Daily, 2025-05-12 (Chongqing**
    Seattle route).
    http://www.cq.xinhuanet.com/20250512/7a8d7d7a134e4253bdb44060bdca11ee/c.html

13. **AirInsight (US**
    China passenger decline).
    https://airinsight.com/the-strange-china-us-travel-market-recovery/

14. **Mighty Travels, 2025-05 (United SFO**
Chengdu).
https://www.mightytravels.com/2025/05/how-us-china-travel-advisory-changes-impact-major-air-routes-between-both-countries-in-2025/