

Planning your trip to China: Tips from my November trip to DKU

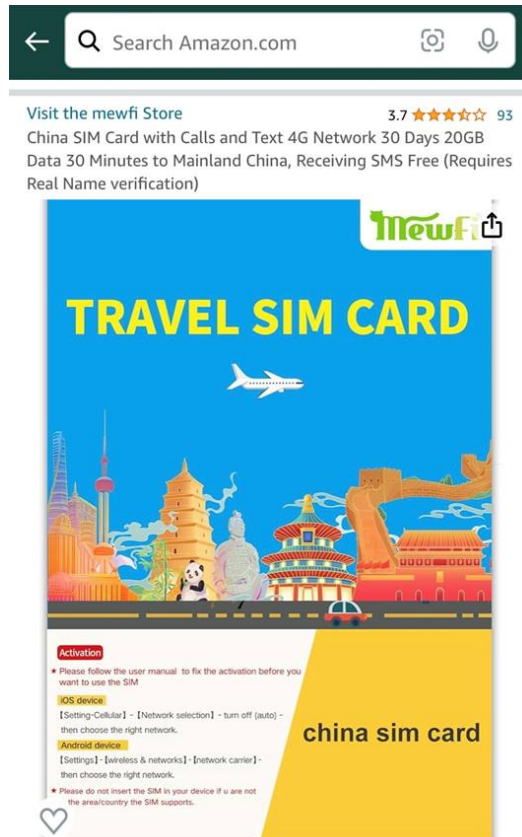
By Jennifer Koech, DKU International Parent Engagement Coordinator

Whether you are a first-year family thinking about traveling to China to help move your student into campus, attending DKU Family Weekend or planning to visit your student during their summer or winter break, the following is my personal trip checklist and top tips for parents from my recent visit for DKU Family Weekend, 2023—which was also my first visit to China!

First you need to do your foundational work—make sure your passport is valid, get your visa to enter China and make your flight arrangements.

Next, your trip checklist:

- **Accommodations:** In China, not all hotels are licensed to accommodate foreigners. Here is a list of hotels nearby DKU that have been verified to accommodate foreigners: <https://dku.campusesp.com/posts/322> I stayed at the second hotel on the list, the “Novotel,” and can recommend it first-hand. The hotel staff were helpful and patient with translation apps, the breakfast buffet (included in room rate) had a lot of variety, and the rooms were clean and modern. It’s about a 10-minute drive to DKU and a DiDi (think Uber/ride sharing) was around 10RMB/1.50USD.
- **Health and wellness:** While there are currently no required vaccines to visit China, it’s a good idea to ensure you are up to date on your seasonal flu shot and other routine vaccines. Also check your health insurance coverage to see if you have coverage in mainland China and if not purchase travel health insurance. Pack medicines you may need for pain or cold and flu relief for unexpected symptoms. And pack your favorite snacks for hunger that strikes at odd times with jet lag!
- **Communication:**
 1. **Add international roaming:** Check with your regular mobile provider to add daily international data roaming. Much of daily life in China runs on phone apps so it’s important to be connected to data.
 2. **Consider getting a Chinese SIM:** I found it very helpful to have a second phone with a local Chinese number. The Chinese number was important to download ride sharing apps like DiDi that only work with a valid Chinese phone number. In my case the phone was an old unlocked iPhone with a cracked screen but it got the job done. If you don’t have a second phone to travel with, you may also consider adding the SIM to your primary phone if possible. While I’m sure there are a number of ways to get a SIM card, I found it easy to purchase one from Amazon for about 20USD. For example, I got the below one and activated it a day before my departure (follow the directions closely to activate—there are several steps).



3. Download a VPN: Make sure you have a VPN downloaded on your phone so you can access sites that may be blocked like google, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc, if that is important to you.

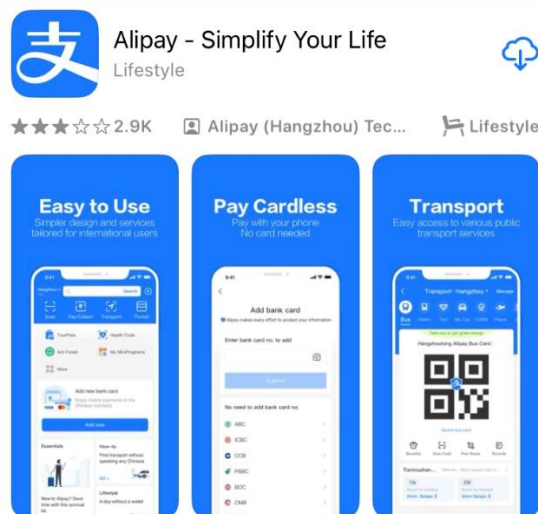
4. Download and activate WeChat: WeChat is like WhatsApp or imessages for making calls and sending texts using data (also helpful for e-payments and location sharing, more below). Activating WeChat and authenticating your identity (your student could help with this if they already have the app) takes several steps so it's advisable to start early getting it set up. A how-to guide developed for students on setting up WeChat and more can be found here: <https://dku.campusesp.com/posts/336>



5. Download a translation app: I used “Translate Now” and it was helpful to translate text to text and voice to text. And while I didn’t use it myself, I heard the App “Alipay” has a quick and accurate translation feature using the phone camera—very helpful with menus and signs!
6. Learn some greetings and common phrases: Consider learning some basic Chinese phrases from resources like Duolingo.
7. Save contact info: Save numbers for quick access for anyone you know who can help translate if you’re in a bind!
8. Remember your battery back-up: Pack a portable phone charger/battery pack for unexpected low battery. Given you will likely use your phone for e-payments and transportation you don’t want your battery to die!

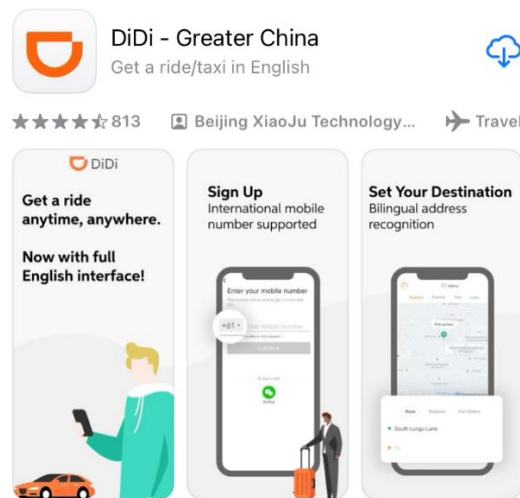
- **Payment:** For context, this may be the most challenging aspect of traveling in China. China’s infrastructure is very different from the rest of the world—for example—do not expect to be able to use a foreign credit card nearly anywhere. Major hotel chains and stores like Starbucks may take it but the vast majority of vendors will not. Law requires vendors to take cash but many will refuse it. During my entire 7-day trip I never withdrew one RMB or used cash for anything. So how can you make payments?

1. WeChat e-payments: Under WeChat /Me/Services/Money you can link foreign credit cards to make e-payments. I added two visa cards—one personal and one business. When it comes time to pay you will scan the vendors code or they will scan your QR code to make a payment. WeChat uses “Weixin Pay” to run the charges and you’ll see a verification process and WeChat message with your receipt. In the set-up process you will also create a pin with Weixin to approve every charge.
2. Alipay e-payments: Alipay also has an e-payment system. DKU parents have said they had success linking a foreign credit card to Alipay but I do not have personal experience with this. I limited my e-payments to WeChat for simplicity's sake. When I travel to China next time, I will likely add Alipay to have a back-up e-payment option if needed.



- **Transportation:**

1. Download the Chinese version of Uber called “DiDi”: You need to do this on your phone with the Chinese SIM and the phone should also have your WeChat account (or Alipay) on it. DiDi is both in English and Chinese. It identifies your location for the pick-up and you enter in your destination—it is a ride sharing app that identifies a ride from either a private party or a taxi. The driver may ask the last four numbers of your Chinese mobile number to verify you are the right customer. You make the payment in the app which is why it’s important to have your WeChat or Alipay account active on the phone with the Chinese mobile number to link payments. The ride is reasonable—a 10-minute ride was about 10RMB or \$1.50USD.



2. Maps: Apple maps worked well for local walking and navigation. Google maps tends to be very outdated. Location sharing within WeChat was also helpful to connect in crowded areas—within an individual “chat” click on the + sign in the bottom right corner and click “location” to share your live current location.
3. Subway/Train: In my experience it got complicated to purchase subway tickets without a permanent Chinese phone number. At the station tickets were purchased through an App which required a Chinese permanent phone number (I imagine this vary city to city). If you are traveling with a local companion, they may be able to purchase a ticket for you or DiDi is a good alternative.

Final thoughts

Be patient and kind with yourself on your trip! You will be operating in a foreign environment with likely little sleep in the first few days. It’s normal to feel anxious or uncomfortable in new and unknown settings. The first time I ordered food by myself in a local restaurant the waiters knew zero English and I knew zero Chinese. Between my translation app and four waiter’s translation apps we got my food ordered and paid for. It was awkward but I personally found local people in Kunshan to be patient with that process. For me the discomfort of being in an unknown environment was well worth the experience of visiting DKU and China!