

Go West, Young Man

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In an opinion column in last month's New York Times entitled "Go East, Young Man", Jonathan Levine, a recent Ivy League graduate and current lecturer at Tsinghua University in Beijing, advised the youth of America to join him in China. Citing an abundance of job opportunities, fellowship amongst expats and comfortable living conditions, Levine made an oft-heard argument for why ambitious Westerners should move to China. However, what Levine didn't say, and what many expats in already China know, is that if you want to strike it big, you've got to go farther than Beijing or Shanghai. Today businesses, spirited entrepreneurs and explorers alike are looking to establish themselves in the so-called 'second-tier' cities of China's interior. The motto ought to be: Go east, young man, but once you've arrived, head due west.



One of the fastest growing cities in the world, Chengdu is a leading destination for expats looking to capitalise on the Middle Kingdom's opportunities. On paper, the city is nothing short of a boom town. According to the American Chamber of Commerce in China: "In the first half of 2010, foreign trade [in Chengdu] increased by 52.1 per cent, and the city's GDP grew by 17.5 per cent." Chengdu's first subway line opened in 2010, the arrival of a second line is scheduled for this year and four more lines are under construction. More than just a roaring industrial and manufacturing hub, Chengdu's IT and retail industries are also growing rapidly. As one of the great bastions of Chinese culture, Chengdu is now poised to be seen on an international stage. For those looking to jump in, the time has never been better.

Charlie Moseley, an IT professional presently living and working in Chengdu, has seen Chengdu's tremendous change firsthand, arriving in the city in 2005. "Chengdu was pretty undeveloped at that time and didn't resemble Shanghai or Beijing much at all. Almost no English was spoken in Chengdu, but it was still a large city of many millions," he says. In addition to the vast changes taking place in the city, Moseley also notes that the kind of expats arriving in Chengdu has changed over time as well. "They

tend to be more professional and better educated. These days you see more architects, business majors and property developers," he says.

Adam Mayer is one of these new professionals that Moseley describes. Now a Project Architect for Urban Hybrid Architecture, Mayer originally did not set his sights on Chengdu when he moved to China two years ago, but was moved by his firm in Beijing to its Chengdu office.

"I had the option of returning to Beijing if I did not find Chengdu suitable, but at the time of being hired I saw that there was a development shift happening from the coastal regions inland," Mayer says. "So I did not hesitate at the opportunity to establish a base in the up-and-coming city." Since moving to Chengdu, he has worked on many large-scale development projects including a new headquarters for the Chengdu Railway Bureau. With so much opportunity, Mayer is happy that he made the shift inland. "I'm definitely not the first architect from the West to realize that there is a building boom taking place in China.



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By the time I arrived in Beijing in mid-2009, I felt like I was pretty late to the party. Yet the sense of having missed the boat changed as soon as I touched down in Chengdu."

While the demand for architecture firms in the city is growing, the IT industry in Chengdu has already reached an astonishing level of maturity. A Quality Assurance Supervisor for video game developer 2k Games, Steve Manners made the move from Shanghai to Chengdu six months ago, finding that his company was behind the curve.

"We're playing catch-up to other software companies. A lot of them have already left Shanghai for the interior of China or other countries like Vietnam. Western companies have realized what many Chinese IT companies already knew: you don't have to go to Beijing or Shanghai to get the best staff," Manners says.

Of course, this move to the interior is not without its challenges. Manners says that the oral English skills of many of his Chengdu employees lag behind their Shanghai counterparts. The language barrier and cultural differences also carry over into daily life.

"Fewer people speak English here. There just aren't as many Western luxuries around, either. In Shanghai you also get used to a more Western attitude," says Manners. "If you



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want something done, it gets done and if it doesn't get done, you'll know why. In Chengdu, there's a more laidback way of life."

While Chengdu currently lacks the luxuries and retail experiences you might find in Shanghai, this sector is also changing rapidly. William Wong is one of many entrepreneurs hoping to cash in on Chengdu's continued growth with his retail concept Italian Fashion Galleria, a store that stocks only imported high-quality Italian leather shoes from brands such as Roberto Cavalli, 1881, Moschino and Bruno Magli. With prices of RMB 2,000 to RMB 10,000 per pair, the shop's shoes are made for Chengdu's growing class of nouveau riche.

Wong says that he chose to open his store in Chengdu because "after travelling around China, I realized that Chengdu would be the next Shanghai or Shenzhen, but the retail market was still primitive." After opening his first store in September 2010, he's already expanded to four stores. And even with this success, Wong feels that given Chengdu's immense growth, he should have more. "I was hoping to have 10 or 12 stores by the end of 2011," he says.

Fancy shoes aren't the only luxury item being bandied about Chengdu. High-class sports cars, the perennial trappings of status, have also popped up. "Outside of nightclubs on Shaolin Lu in Chengdu, it's routine to see European sports cars lined up. Ferraris, Lamborghinis, Bentleys – it's like South Beach Miami," says Moseley. And while the rise of luxury products could be seen as evidence of a culture of baseless materialism, Chengdu's rich cultural history promises that the city will flourish culturally as well in the years ahead.

In 2010, Chengdu was named the first 'City of Gastronomy' in Asia and just the second in the world. To earn the title, a city must cultivate a cuisine and community of chefs that is characteristic of the region, while still utilising traditional cooking methods.

While Chengdu's food culture has proved itself on the international stage, other cultural strongholds, like art, are still coming into their own.

Andrew James, the owner of the formerly Shanghai-based Andrew James Gallery, has also recently made the decision to move his operation to Chengdu. James acknowledges that "Chengdu is home to some of the greatest artists in China. Many great Chinese contemporary artists originate from Sichuan, but have felt the need to move to Beijing to look for new opportunities."

However, with the rise of Chengdu, many of these artists are returning home. According to James, the art scene in Chengdu is still small with "only four or five real galleries", but holds tremendous potential. "Possibly even more so than Shanghai," he says. "There are a lot of collectors here who are very proud of the Sichuan artists."

A new development in the vein of Beijing's 789 and Shanghai's M50 called the East Chengdu Music Park has also recently opened, fostering local art talent and providing a venue for musicians. Moseley says, "There's a DJ school which has opened there called Beat Base. They have classes everyday on performing, creating mix-tapes and music production with top notch equipment. It's incredible to me that something like that exists in Chengdu."

Foreign writers and bloggers have also appeared on the scene, publicising Chengdu's unique culture for a larger audience. Moseley maintains a blog called Chengdu Living that writes in-depth articles about local culture and events for the city's growing English-language audience. Mayer has also started a well-regarded blog called China Urban Development about his on-the-ground experiences.

Derek Sandhaus, a former editor at an English-language publishing house in Shanghai, also recently relocated to Chengdu to work on a book about Chinese drinking culture. "Most of the major *baijiu* manufacturers have offices in Chengdu so I'm able to meet people in the industry and go out for interviews," he says. He's also started a blog on *baijiu* called 300 Shots.

"There's an anecdotal theory put out in the *baijiu* industry by someone that there is a drink tasting threshold. That is, there's a drink that you don't like, but after a few glasses you acquire a taste for it. With *baijiu*, that threshold is supposedly 300 shots." In terms of his progress Sandhaus says, "I'm 50 shots in and it still tastes pretty bad." Although Chengdu's local firewater might still be turning away foreigners, it looks as if everything else in city isn't.



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