China, first time.

A visual survival guide

Get connected. Pay confidently. Order dinner.
Find your ride and get where you want to go.

PHONE FIRST

Alipay + WeChat

Set up before flying.

SCAN TO ORDER

Menus and payments

Use the app scanner.

NO ROUTINE TIP

Keep backup cash

Bring a physical card.

START HERE

02-03 Phone plans + VPN

04-06 Alipay + WeChat

07-08 DiDi + maps + metro

09-10 Translation + food

11-12 Trains + daily essentials

13-14 Sources + screenshot credits

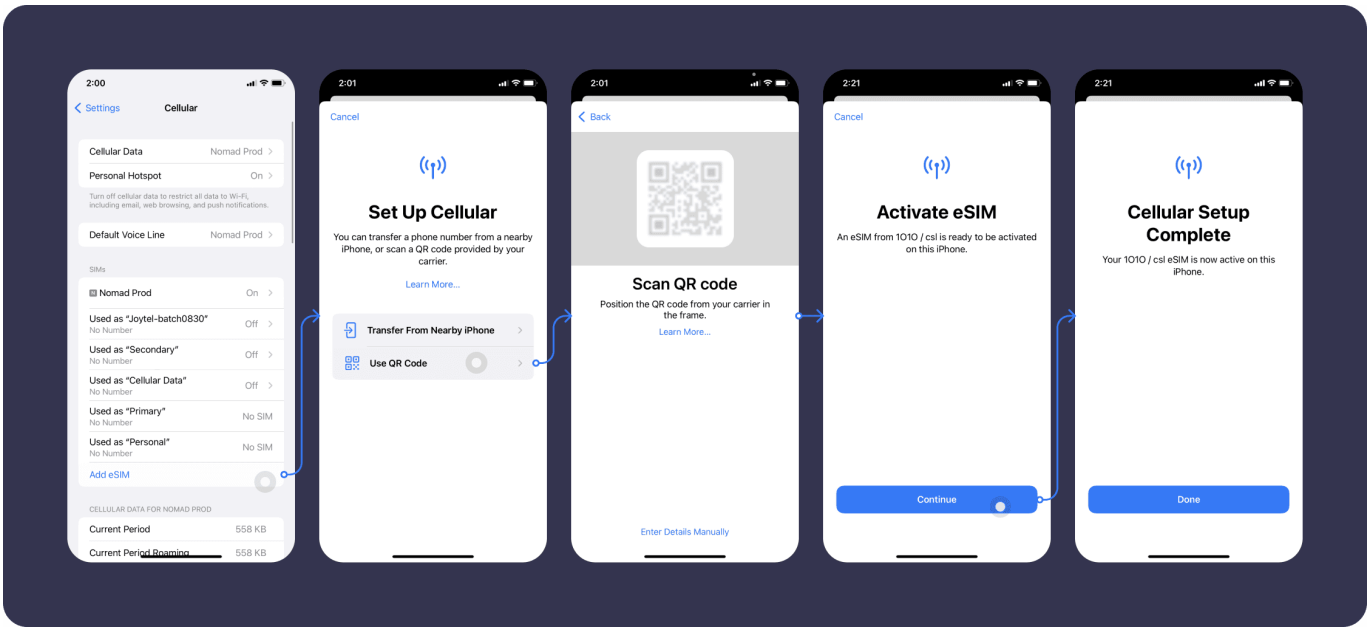
Real published app screenshots, with practical instructions.
Screens vary by phone, language, account and app version. Examples are not live accounts or usable payment codes.

Get online before landing

Recommended starting point: an unlocked phone with a China travel eSIM.

Choose enough data for your trip

For a roughly two-week visit, budget 10-20 GB for maps, messages and translation. This is a planning estimate; video and hotspot use need more.



Nomad's published iPhone installation sequence. Use the QR code issued for YOUR plan.

1 Buy and install before departure

Check phone unlock status, eSIM support, coverage and plan validity. Nomad says new plans cannot be purchased inside mainland China.

2 Select the travel line for data

On arrival, enable the eSIM and its data roaming as instructed. Disable home-line data roaming and automatic data switching.

3 Keep access to verification texts

Travel eSIMs are data-only. Keep your usual number available for verification texts; check carrier charges.

Need a Chinese phone number?

A local +86 SIM helps with calls and some delivery or booking services. Bring your passport to an official China Mobile, China Unicom or China Telecom outlet. Have staff activate and test it.

Do this at the airport

Test mobile data with Wi-Fi off. Open your saved hotel address.

Screens: Nomad official installation guide. iPhone example; Android menus differ.

Keep your usual apps working

A travel eSIM and a VPN do different jobs. Know which connection you are using.

Travel eSIM with international routing	Nomad says its China plans support Google, Gmail, WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram without a separate VPN.
Hotel Wi-Fi or mainland local SIM	Local internet restrictions apply. Joining Wi-Fi can change which overseas apps work.
Home carrier roaming	Access and cost depend on your carrier. Confirm both before departure.



Astrill's published interface example.

1 Install before traveling

If using a VPN, install it on every device, sign in, and save setup/support instructions offline.

2 Check device support

Astrill is an option to consider. Its StealthVPN protocol supports Mac, Windows and Android, but not iPhone. Reliability can change.

If an overseas app stops loading

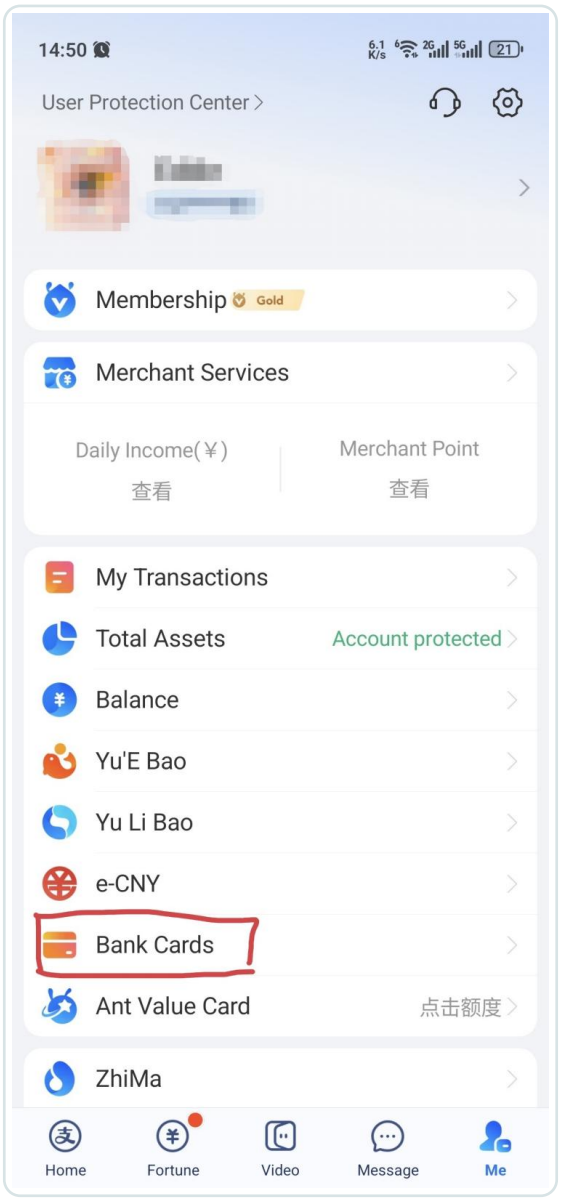
First switch off hotel Wi-Fi and try your travel eSIM data. An eSIM is not a VPN and does not add VPN-style encryption. Avoid assuming every China eSIM uses international routing.

China restricts unauthorized VPN use. Review current travel advice. Provider statements are not independent performance tests.

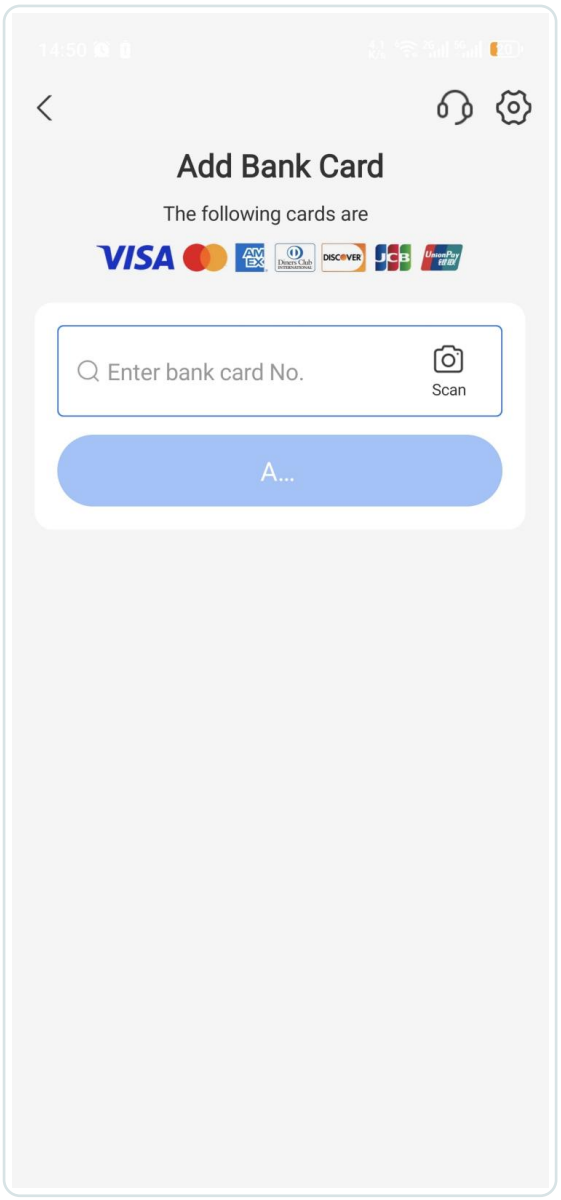
Set up Alipay at home

Have your passport, bank card and SMS-capable phone number ready.

1. Install Alipay and choose English. Register with your country code and phone number.
2. Open **Me > Bank Cards > Add**, then enter an eligible card.
3. Follow the bank and identity-verification prompts; use accurate passport details.
4. Set your payment password. Try a small merchant purchase after arrival.



ME → BANK CARDS



ADD AN ELIGIBLE CARD

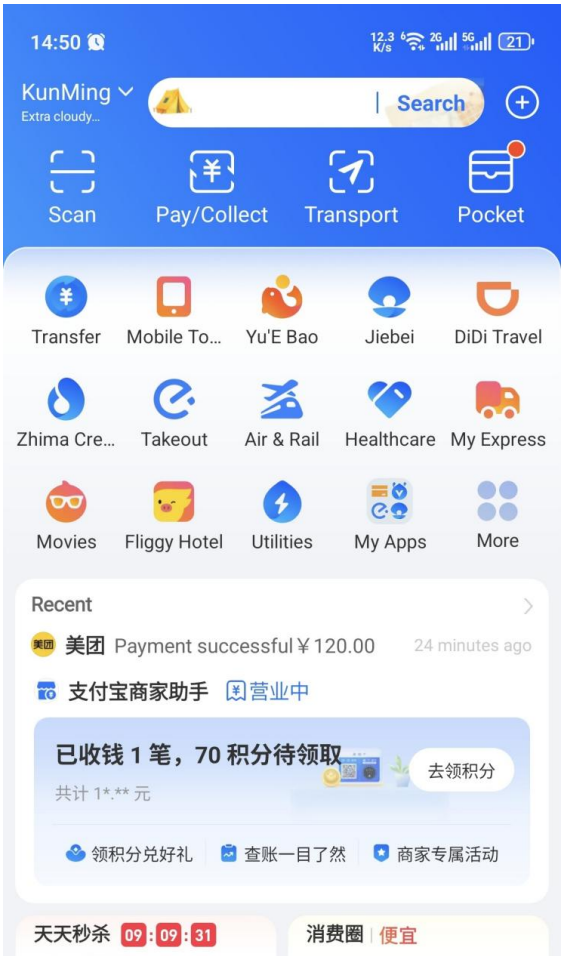
A Chinese bank account is not required. Eligible debit cards may work too; acceptance depends on the card and issuing bank.

Screens: Keats School practical manual (2026), p. 22. Existing-account example; your menus and card list may differ.

AT THE COUNTER

Two ways to pay

Use Alipay for everyday purchases. Keep a card and some RMB cash as backup.



SCAN / PAY-COLLECT

1 You scan the shop's code

Tap Scan. Check the merchant, enter the amount if asked, and confirm. Show the successful payment screen.

2 The cashier scans your code

Open Pay/Collect or your payment code. Let the cashier scan it. Use the live code in your own app.

3 Check before paying twice

If the result is unclear, check transaction history and ask the cashier before retrying.

A personal transfer can fail

Overseas cards support merchant purchases, not person-to-person transfers. Ask for the merchant payment option or use a backup.

Fees and your backup wallet

Payments up to ¥200 generally have no platform service fee. Above ¥200, a 3% fee on the full amount may apply. Check the screen; bank fees can be separate. Keep a physical card and a modest cash reserve, such as ¥300-500 for ordinary city travel.

No routine tipping

Tips are generally not expected at ordinary restaurants. Some venues add a service charge; private guides and tours may have separate arrangements.

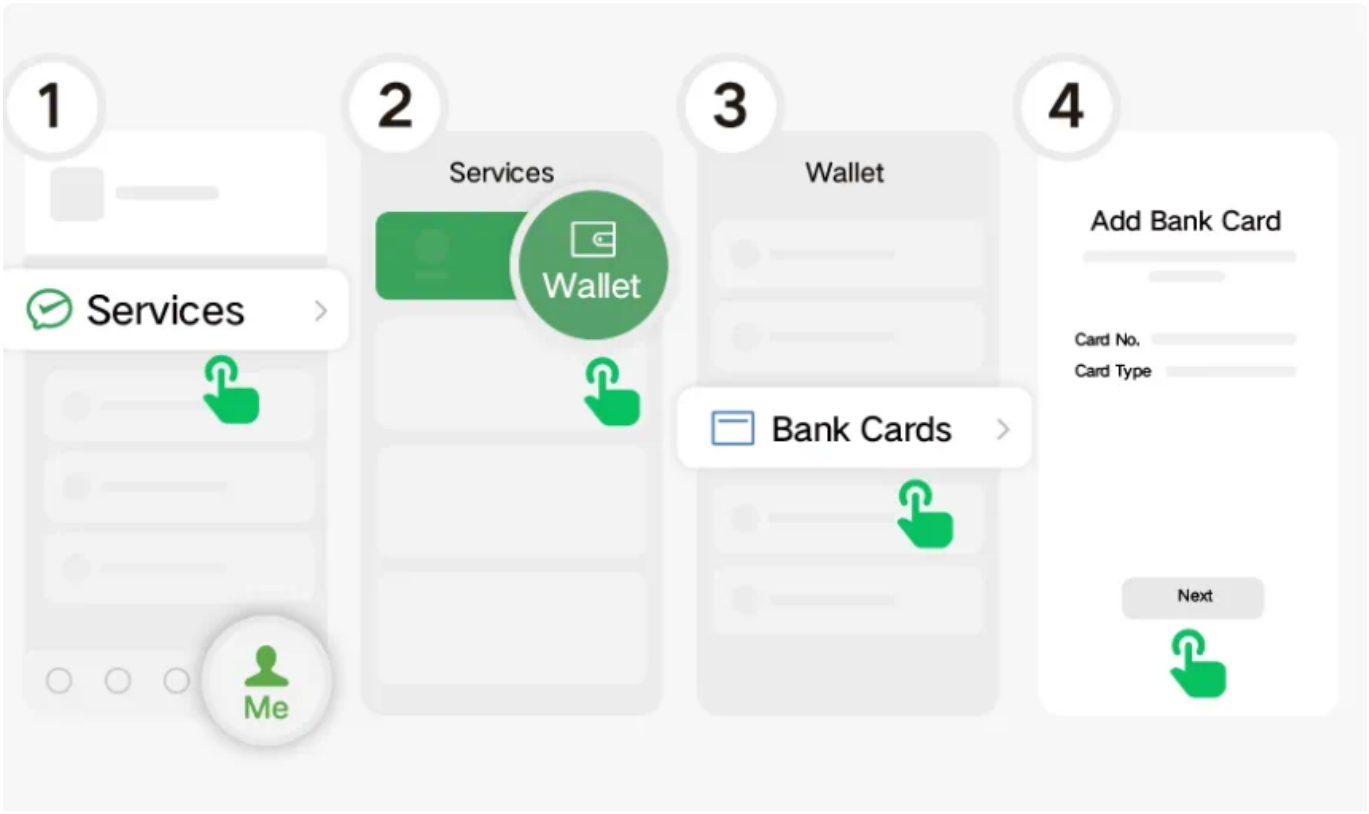
Screenshot: Keats School (2026). Cash remains a useful fallback; direct foreign-card acceptance varies by merchant.

YOUR SECOND ESSENTIAL APP

WeChat: chat and backup pay

Use it for local contacts, QR menus, mini-programs and another way to pay.

Register before departure so you have time to complete any account checks. To add a card, open **Me > Services > Wallet > Bank Cards** and follow the identity and card prompts.



THE WALLET PATH

The official illustration shows the menu sequence. A new account may need additional activation or identity checks before these options appear.

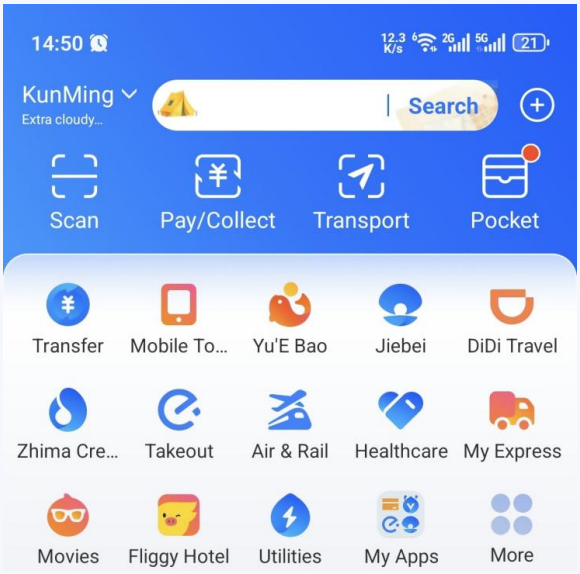
- **Keep contacts handy:** add your hotel, guide or local host when useful.
- **Open restaurant menus:** use WeChat's Scan function when the table code asks for WeChat.
- **Book a car directly:** Me > Services > Ride Hailing opens DiDi. The separate DiDi app is optional.

Image: Shanghai government payment guide (2026), an official UI illustration. The next page shows the ride-hailing entry.

Book DiDi inside your wallet

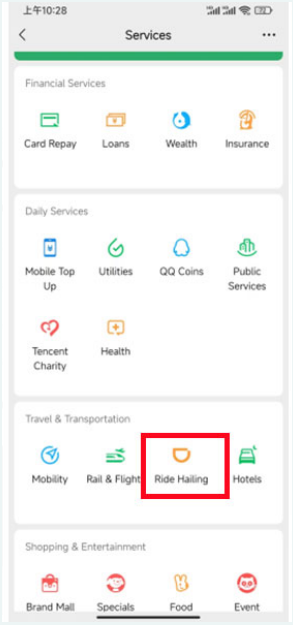
You can book directly in Alipay or WeChat. No separate DiDi app is required.

FROM ALIPAY



Tap **DiDi Travel**, or search for DiDi. Transport > Taxi is another entry in supported layouts.

FROM WECHAT



Me > Services > Ride Hailing.
Look under Travel & Transportation.

1 Enter the destination

Paste the Chinese hotel or attraction address when a name is ambiguous.

2 Confirm the exact pickup point

Check the entrance, terminal, parking level or pickup-zone number. Walk there before requesting.

3 Select a car and review the estimate

Then confirm the request. Use the in-app messages if you need to contact the driver.

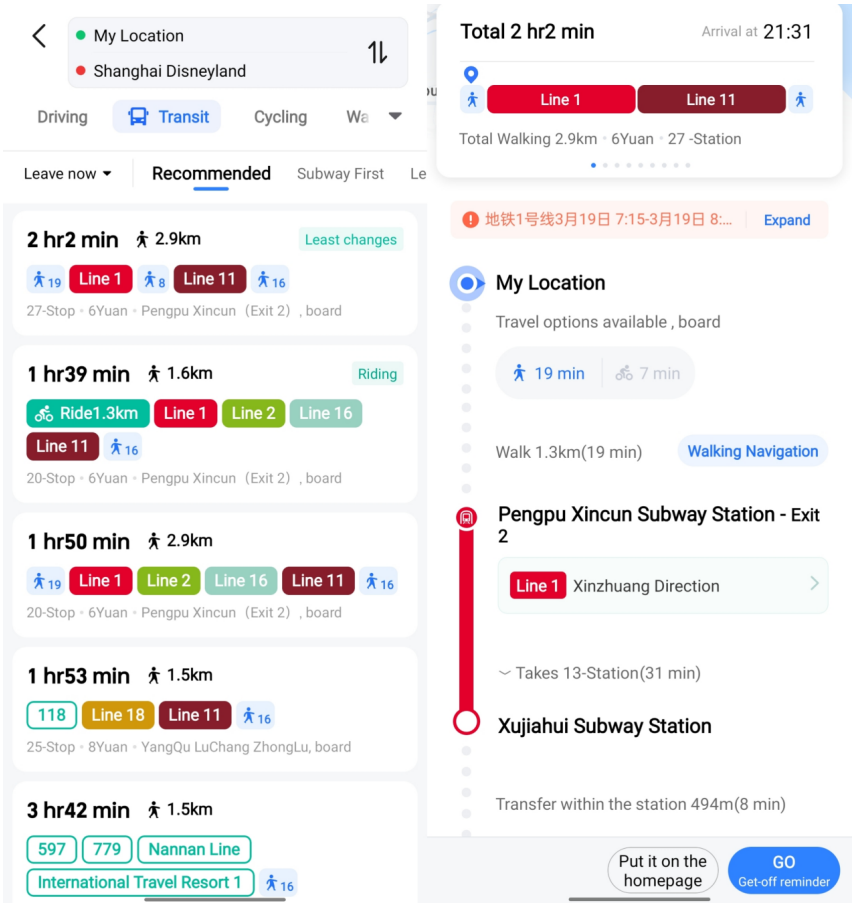
4 Match the plate and verify your trip

Show the requested trip code, often the last four digits of your registered number. Check payment status after the ride.

Screens: Alipay via Keats (2026); WeChat Services via Shanghai government (updated 2026). Airport pickups use designated zones.

Amap and the metro

Search the exact place, compare routes, and check the station exit you need.



Amap's published example: compare transit routes, then read the line changes.

1 Choose English

Install Amap / AMap Global. Set English where available.

2 Save your hotel

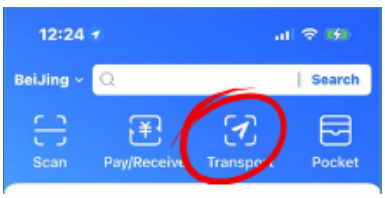
Keep its Chinese name, address and phone number offline.

3 Check your route

Choose walking or public transit. Match the destination and entrance.

FOR THE METRO

In Alipay, open **Transport**, choose your city and activate its metro service if your account is supported. Use the same activated transit code to enter and exit. This is separate from your shopping payment code.



1. Transport



2. Metro

If activation fails

Buy a ticket or ask the staffed counter. Available payment methods vary by city.

Screens: Amap via Shanghai government; Alipay metro activation via Beijing government (2024). Transit rules vary by city.

Keep a translator one tap away

Download English and Chinese before departure, then test in airplane mode.



Apple's published example. Set your own language pair; sample translated text is illustrative.

1 Select the language pair

Choose English and Chinese (Mandarin, Simplified).

2 Type or speak a short sentence

Use direct phrases such as “Please take me to this address.” Show the translated text.

3 Use Camera for menus and signs

For text already on your phone, take a screenshot and use a supported image-translation tool.

4 Download an offline fallback

Apple Translate supports downloaded languages. Google Translate also offers offline packs; test the functions you will need.

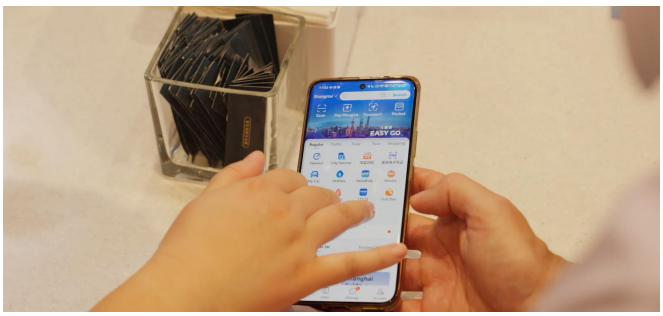
Make communication easier

Use short sentences and Chinese addresses. For serious allergies, show staff a carefully checked Chinese allergy card; menu translation cannot verify ingredients.

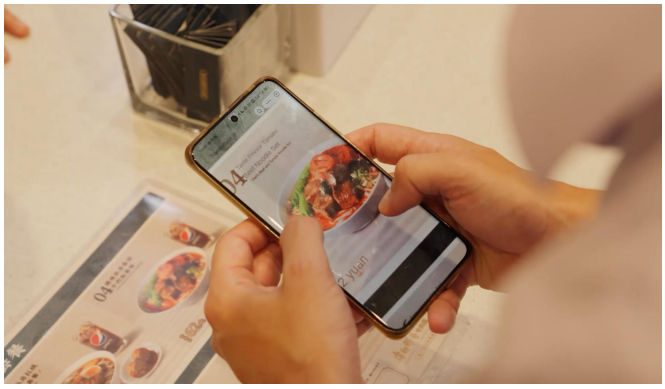
Screenshot: Apple iPhone User Guide, accessed November 2026. Online features still need a working connection.

Order dinner with a QR code

The code on your table usually opens the menu inside Alipay or WeChat.



OPEN THE MENU



TRANSLATE WHAT YOU NEED

1. **Scan with the indicated app**

   Use Alipay or WeChat's built-in scanner. Confirm the table number and choose dine-in or takeaway.

2. **Choose dishes and options**

   Use pictures and translation. Check quantities, spice level and any add-ons before submitting.

3. **Check when to pay**

   Some restaurants ask for payment before cooking; others charge after the meal. Confirm the order went through.

When the menu will not work

Ask staff to take your order or point to a dish photo. Show: 请帮我点餐。 (Please help me order.)

Food delivery to your hotel

Ask reception about access and driver contact. Some services need a local number. In Shanghai, try Easy Go inside Alipay.

NO CHILI, PLEASE

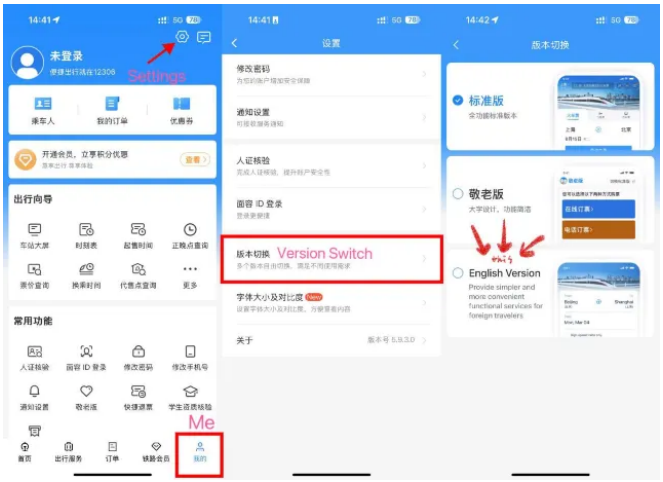
请不要放辣椒。

In Shanghai, Easy Go inside Alipay can translate a paper menu using the camera. Elsewhere, use your translator or ask staff.

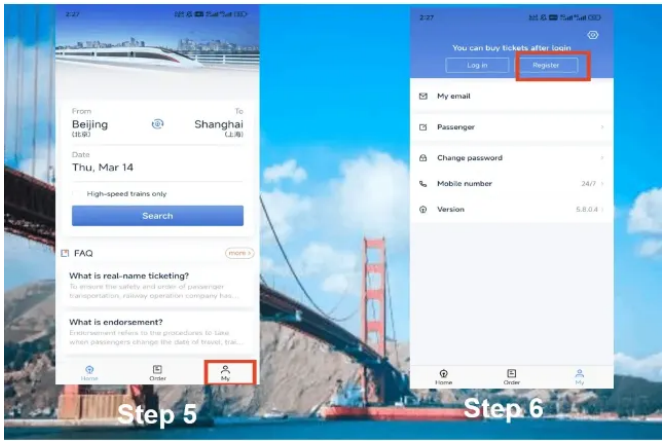
Images: Shanghai government dining tutorial (2025), showing Alipay use and camera translation; these are published video stills.

Train tickets and hotel check-in

Use your passport details consistently and check the exact station name.



SWITCH 12306 TO ENGLISH



SEARCH THE EXACT STATIONS

1. **Register and verify**

   Use the official Railway 12306 app or its English website. Enter your passenger details as instructed and complete passport verification.

2. **Choose and confirm your train**

   Check the date, departure station, arrival station and seat class. Pay and confirm the ticket was issued; a pending request is not a ticket.

3. **Bring the original passport**

   Carry the passport used for the booking. Allow extra time at an unfamiliar station; one hour is a useful planning buffer.

Hotel check-in

Bring your original passport and booking confirmation. Hotels handle accommodation registration. For a private home or other non-hotel stay, you or your host must arrange registration within 24 hours.

Station-name trap: Shanghai, Shanghai Hongqiao and Shanghai South are different stations. Save the exact Chinese station name with your booking.

Screens: Trip.com's 12306 tutorial (accessed 2026); examples may show past travel dates. Book your own route and date.

SAVE THIS PAGE OFFLINE

Your first-day cheat sheet

Phone charged. Passport accessible. Hotel address saved in Chinese.

- **Before flying:** check entry permission for your passport and itinerary; install apps and finish account checks.
- **At arrivals:** test mobile data, make a small payment and identify your official taxi queue or pickup point.
- **In your day bag:** phone, cable, power bank, tissues, hand sanitizer, payment backup and water.
- **Drinking water:** choose sealed bottled water or properly boiled drinking water.
- **Electricity:** mainland supply is 220V. Check chargers for 100-240V; a plug adapter does not convert voltage.
- **Domestic flights:** power banks need a clear CCC/3C mark and must not be recalled models. Check airline battery rules.

SHOW THESE PHRASES

Please help me order.	请帮我点餐。
Please take me to this address.	请带我去这个地址。
Can I pay cash?	可以付现金吗？
Where is the restroom?	洗手间在哪里？
I do not speak Chinese.	我不会说中文。
Please call an ambulance.	请帮我叫救护车。

110	POLICE	120	AMBULANCE	119	FIRE

A data-only eSIM does not provide normal voice calls. In an emergency, ask nearby staff to call if your phone cannot.

Sources and screen credits

Tap a source title to open the original. Checked November 4, 2026.

01 **Mobile payments: current Alipay and WeChat steps**
Shanghai government, September 2026

02 **Overseas cards, payment fees and ATM cash**
Shanghai government, September 2026

03 **Merchant payments and personal-transfer limits**
Baiyun government payment handbook, 2024

04 **Alipay and WeChat screen examples**
Keats School practical manual, 2026, pp. 22-24

05 **DiDi in WeChat and Alipay; driver verification**
Shanghai government, updated July 2026

06 **Transport and metro screen examples**
Beijing government visitor guide, 2024

07 **Amap route and navigation screenshots**
Shanghai government / Amap, published guide

08 **Nomad iPhone installation screenshots**
Nomad official installation instructions

09 **Nomad China connectivity and purchase restrictions**
Nomad official help center, accessed November 2026

10 **Local SIM cards and passport registration**
Shanghai government telecom guide

11 **Astrill interface example and supported protocols**
Astrill official documentation; vendor claims

12 **Astrill protocol compatibility by device**
Astrill official protocol documentation

13 **Apple Translate screen and instructions**
Apple iPhone User Guide, accessed November 2026

This guide covers mainland China. App layouts, coverage, prices and rules can change; follow the current in-app instructions.

Sources and screen credits

Tap a source title to open the original. Checked November 4, 2026.

14 **Download languages for offline translation**
Google Translate official help

15 **Food ordering and menu translation examples**
Shanghai government CIIE dining guide, October 2025

16 **Restaurant QR ordering and staff fallback**
RX Global visitor guide, 2024

17 **Train booking and foreign-passport requirements**
China Railway 12306 official FAQ

18 **12306 English settings and search screenshots**
Trip.com tutorial, accessed November 2026

19 **Hotel and private-home accommodation registration**
National Immigration Administration, 2026

20 **Power banks on domestic flights**
Civil Aviation Administration of China, 2025

21 **Emergency numbers**
Beijing government visitor services

22 **Tipping and restaurant service charges**
Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism

23 **Drinking water**
TravelChinaGuide practical visitor advice

24 **Voltage and plug adapters**
TravelChinaGuide practical visitor advice

25 **Current travel advice and VPN restrictions**
U.S. Department of State

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This guide covers mainland China. App layouts, coverage, prices and rules can change; follow the current in-app instructions.