Chongqing, the world’s largest city

There are several inaccuracies in the title; on the one hand, in terms of area, it is indeed the largest city on Earth (and in the world, as we currently only know of Earth); it is practically the same size as Austria.



The next inaccuracy is that the city consists of two parts: the city itself and the surrounding area. China is designating more and more of its major cities as special economic zones, which are thus *Special Economic Zones* (**SEZs**), or free trade zones. This is an attempt to resolve the tension arising between traditional, one-party socialist China and its modern metropolises, which are developing at a breathtaking pace.

These zones guarantee foreign companies the freedom to manage their workforce as they see fit; for example, they have the right to dismiss employees, which runs counter to the socialist Chinese principle of *“lifetime employment with a single company”*. SEZs are free to operate airports, ports and railway infrastructure; moreover, corporation tax rates within these zones are significantly lower than elsewhere in the country. There are currently twenty such zones in the country (in almost every major city). These zones are under direct government control, and substantial surrounding areas have been allocated to them to facilitate their development. Chongqing was thus separated from Sichuan Province, and an area roughly the size of Austria was assigned to it; for the sake of simplicity, this area was named Chongqing, just like the city itself.


Monorail a Liziba állomás felől. Ott megy át a házon keresztül.
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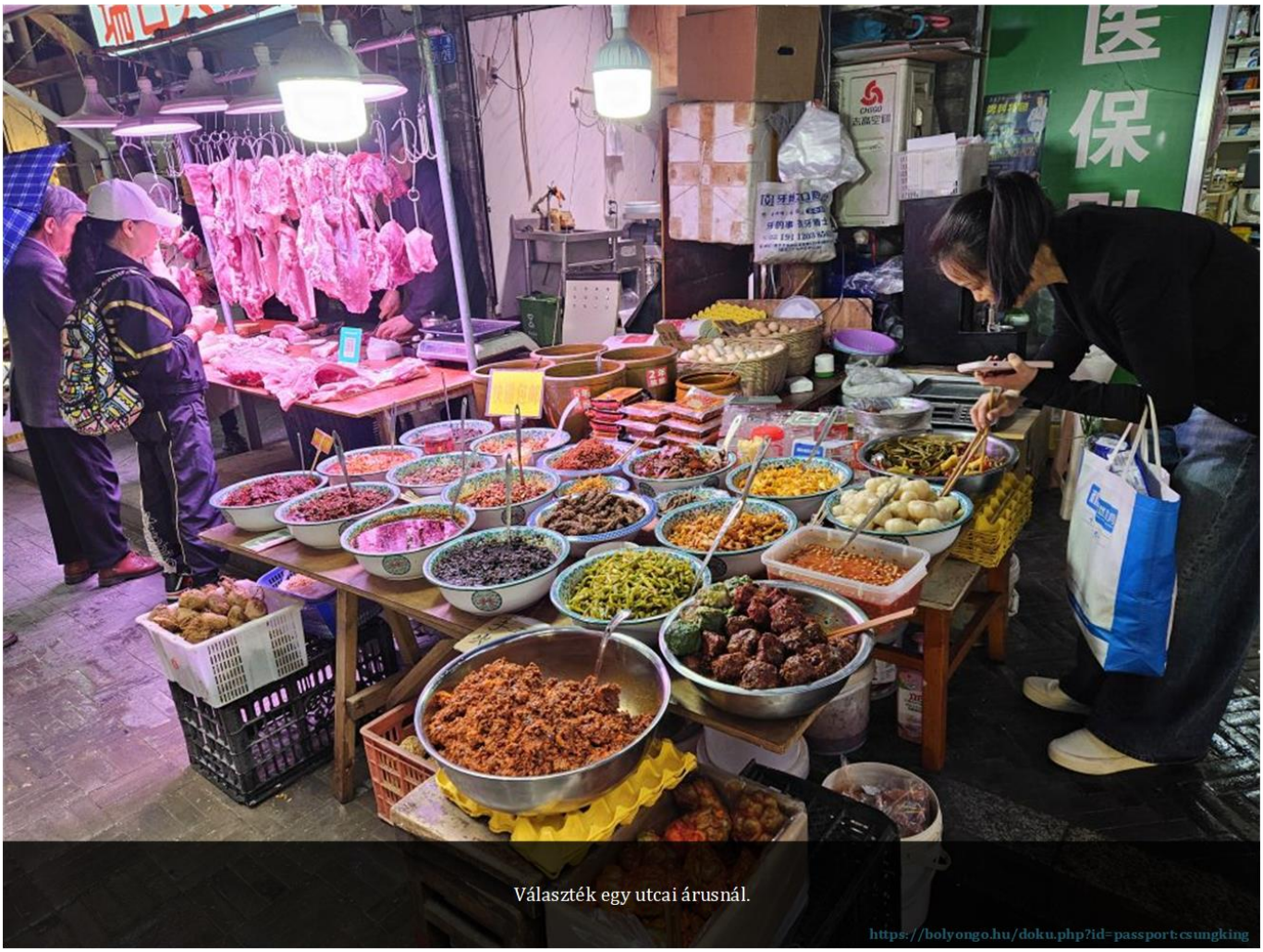
The development of these special zones, of course, took off immediately; for us Europeans, this dynamism is almost inconceivable: hundreds of kilometres of railways and metro lines are built every year, cities are gobbling up vast swathes of their surroundings, and awe-inspiring skyscrapers are stretching from nowhere up to the sky.

I wanted to see what this city was like up close, and luckily, my wife and two of my younger children (out of the four) were on board with this rather unusual choice of holiday destination; so, after a short 14-hour flight from Frankfurt via Shenyang, we arrived in the city.



Prices are reassuringly low compared to the usual German price levels. For the first few days, we rented a three-bedroom flat on the 35th floor, with a breathtaking view overlooking the Yangtze River, for sixty euros a day. I'd booked the accommodation before the trip via *booking.com*; the owner (a private landlord!), Mic, was a helpful, easy-going chap. The cleanliness of the flat left a bit to be desired, but it later became clear on several occasions that the country isn't exactly tailored to cleanliness fanatics – to put it mildly.

The apartment block was 45 storeys high, mind you, but it didn't stand out from its surroundings. On the ground floor, a row of food stalls offered a long list of local dishes and gave a taste of the city's mix of smells, odours and atmosphere, where the stench seeping from the sewers mingles with the aroma of heavily spiced food and smog. Perhaps it's just me, but somehow the smell is always part of the experience of a particular city – something that's obviously missing from films, but as soon as I arrive in an Asian city, I can immediately identify with it. Some people might find it stinky, but to me it's simply distinctive, just like, for example, the smell of cow dung and fresh grass that's inextricably linked to mountain huts in Austria.



Választék egy utcai árusnál.

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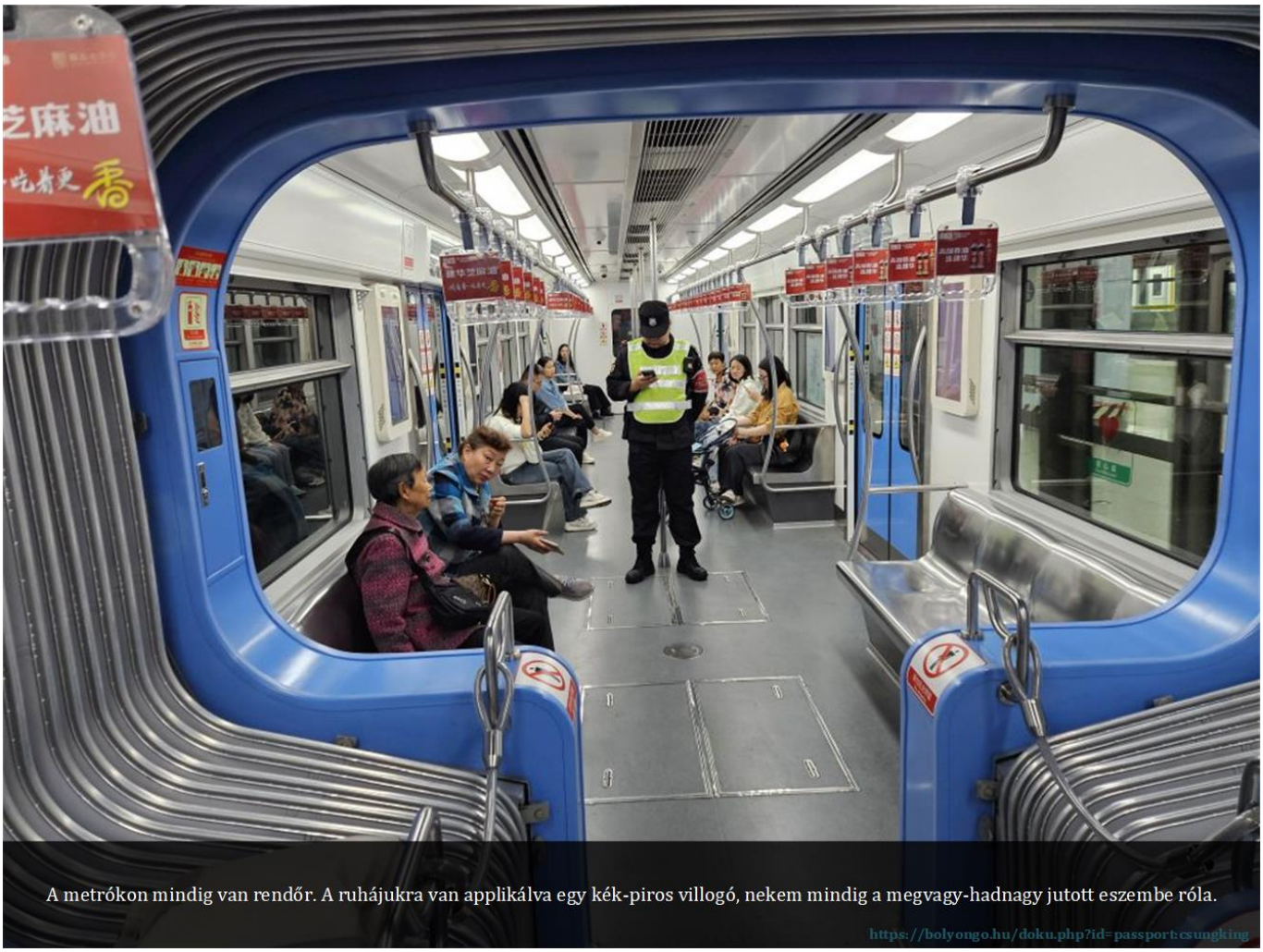
In the city, the terribly weather-beaten, dilapidated and mould-stained old buildings coexist side by side with the glittering, eye-catching skyscrapers decked out in LED lighting. The city is built on mountains, between which the Yangtze River winds like a snake squeezed into a narrow passage. There isn't just one city centre with skyscrapers; as far as the eye can see, these 60–80-storey, glittering buildings are scattered throughout the city, clustered in several groups.

At night, almost the entire city is lit up; running lights and a riot of colours lend the scene a somewhat sci-fi feel, as if the sets of **Blade Runner** were coming to life. Another parallel with the film is the constant background noise – a cacophony of monotonously repeating loud voices – emanating from street vendors, traffic lights, shops and eateries. The noise of the cars isn't really that noticeable anymore, especially as (I think) most of them are now electric. Oh, and there are car makes I've never even heard of in my life; German makes are mostly just status symbols on the roads.



Surprisingly, the city doesn’t offer too many tourist attractions yet; they’re still in the early stages of opening up and transitioning. Somehow, it gives me the same feeling as living in Budapest around 1991, when the changes began, more and more tourists were arriving in the city, and we still believed that something good might come of it. (We were wrong. End of parenthesis.)

The city is orderly and clean. Everywhere – for example, at all the tourist attractions – they ask for passports; cameras constantly monitor our every move, and at every metro entrance, bags and rucksacks are scanned, and bottled water is even tested with a separate radiation detector. Police officers patrol almost every train; the distinctive blue-and-red flashing lights on their vests ‘give them away’ from a distance. It might seem a bit excessive, but based on our experiences in Germany, where no one who doesn’t want to can simply walk in and out of the country unchecked, this strictness somehow seems the better option. Yes, I know, China is a communist state, and we can turn our noses up at it because, after all, we live in a democracy – well, I have a different opinion on that too; if anyone’s interested, I’ll write about it one day…



A metrókon mindig van rendőr. A ruhájukra van applikálva egy kék-piros villogó, nekem mindig a megvagy-hadnagy jutott eszembe róla.

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On one occasion, we were only able to reach a particular attraction by walking through an abandoned building site. No signposts, no information anywhere, the *Google Maps* works only very limitedly, and almost no one speaks foreign languages. Of course, there's always Google's offline translator, as well as the tried-and-tested 'Activity' feature, and fortunately the locals, despite this awkward communication, try to help the strangers who've stumbled upon the area in a friendly and patient manner.

Of course, the YouTube videos had already given me some pointers on what's worth seeing in the city: the monorail running through the house, *Hongyadong* and *Chaotianmen Square* were obvious choices. Huge crowds had gathered at these spots, but non-Chinese features were a rare sight amongst the tourists; it seems that domestic tourism is also developing by leaps and bounds.

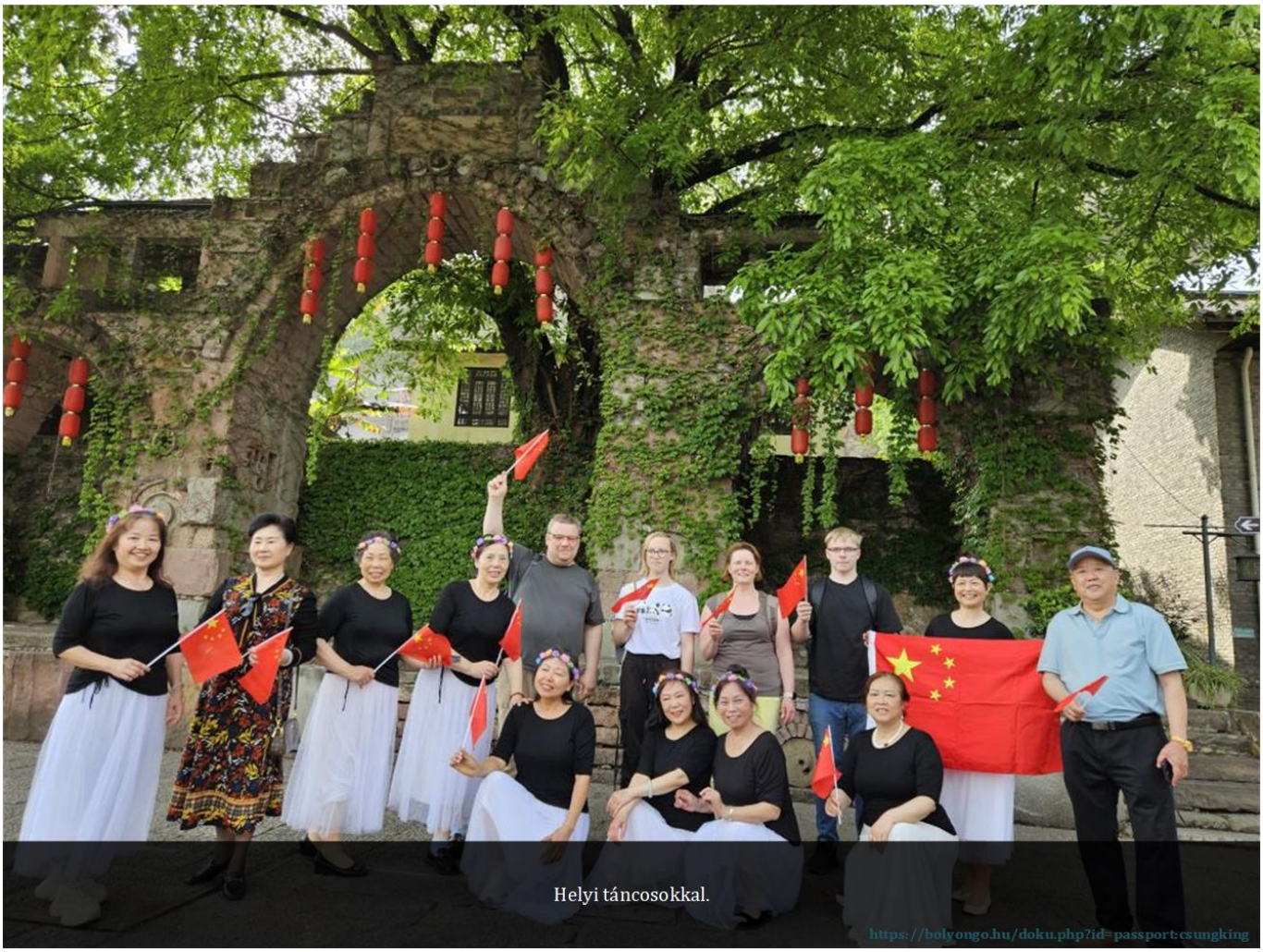


Szőkefejű kölykeim mindenütt helyi nevezetességként működtek, a csinosabbnál csinosabb csajok gyűltek köréjük.

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We didn’t really come across anyone who didn’t look Chinese; a European appearance is still something of a rarity here. Both my daughter and my son are striking blondes, and people – mainly young girls – would often come up to them asking to take a selfie with them. My daughter was impressed, but of course, my son was particularly taken with just how popular he’d become simply because of his looks.

It’s a personal quirk of mine that I don’t like tourist attractions, because there you only meet fellow tourists, not the locals. I could never bring myself to go on an organised tour where you just tick off the sights. I simply love just setting off somewhere, walking 5–10–15 kilometres a day, and taking the metro on a whim; in my experience, that’s when you’re most likely to stumble upon the most memorable adventures.



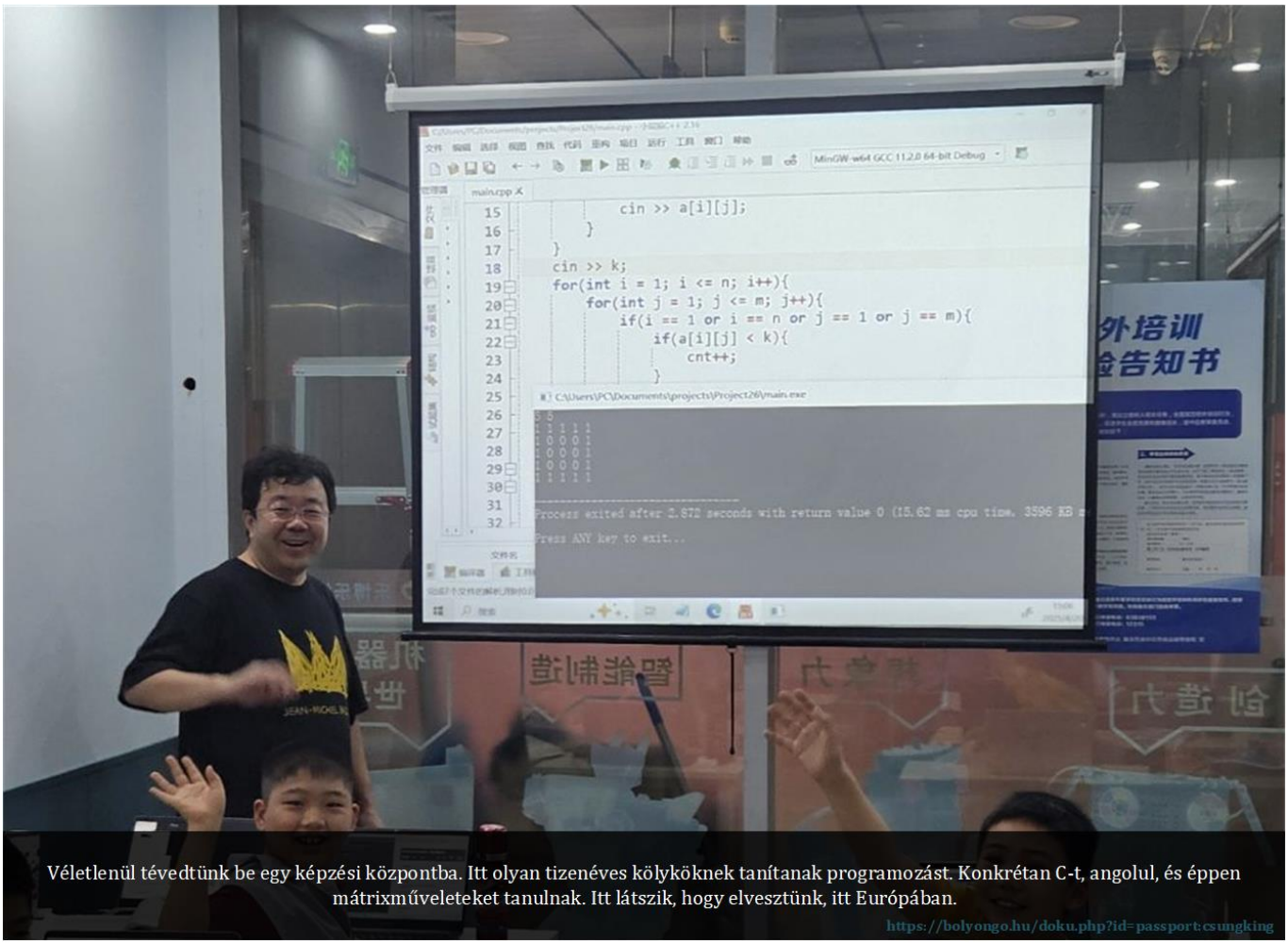
We went to a local attraction (some sort of industrial park) that had long since been bulldozed. The taxi driver’s eyes popped out like a snail’s when I signalled that yes, we’d be getting out here. A newly constructed footpath (actually a running track) started from here, which initially led through small private vegetable gardens, terraced mini rice paddies, then through the aforementioned construction site into an abandoned wooden-house settlement beneath a modern motorway cable bridge. Here, ladies dressed in matching outfits were holding a dance rehearsal, followed by a performance for us, ending with a group photo while waving Chinese flags.

Or in the evening we’d go out in search of something to eat, and of course we popped into the local supermarket, where frogs and turtles awaited their fate as part of a family lunch, or marvelled at the crowds of people dancing and exercising to music in front of the huge 30–40-storey blocks of flats.



Everywhere – and I mean absolutely everywhere – you can get ready-made meals, fruit and all manner of seafood delicacies, even though Chongqing is actually very far from the sea, much further than Budapest, for example.

For instance, when we happened to pop into a community centre, looking for a coffee, where they run activities for children. In some places, the children were drawing or painting in several groups. My wife works with children; she found it incredible just how disciplined the youngsters were during the sessions, whilst outside the parents, who were trickling in and out, waited patiently for the sessions to end. Given my professional bias, I was particularly struck by the group (I even took a photo of them; they were waving cheerfully, along with their teacher) in which a teacher was teaching C++ to 10–12-year-olds.

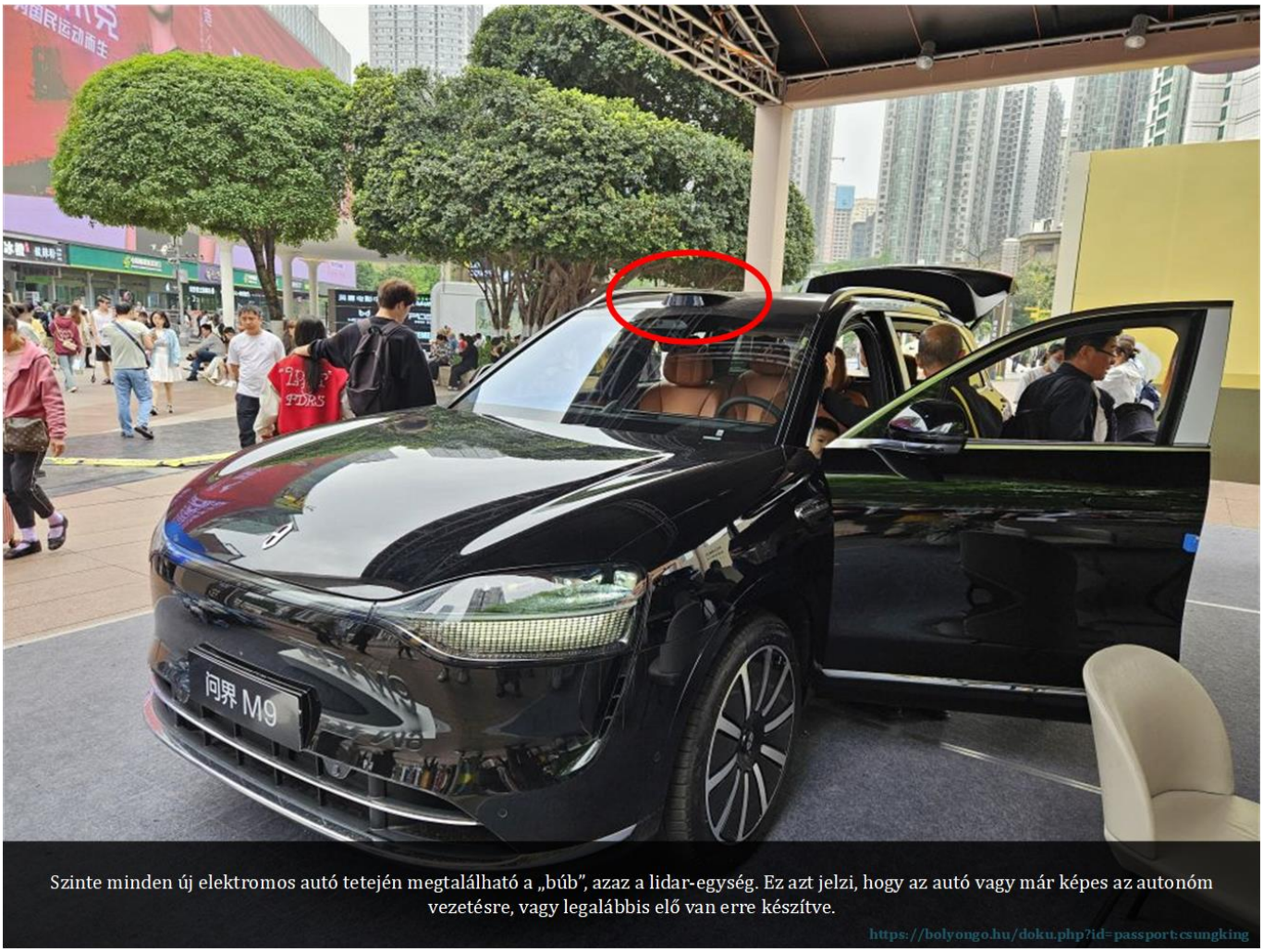


Véletlenül tévedtünk be egy képzési központba. Itt olyan tizenéves kölyköknek tanítanak programozást. Konkrétan C-t, angolul, és éppen mátrixműveleteket tanulnak. Itt látszik, hogy elvesztünk, itt Európában.

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The code displayed on the screen, within nested loops, involved matrix operations – in English, of course. So we've still got a good ten years left with our supposed digital technological advantage, and then this generation will come along…

Not far from our accommodation was a primary school, where we watched as the children came out class by class at the end of lessons, around five o'clock in the afternoon. Their teacher leads them out, holding small boards; the children turn to face each other and bow, then high-five their teacher and run off to their parents.

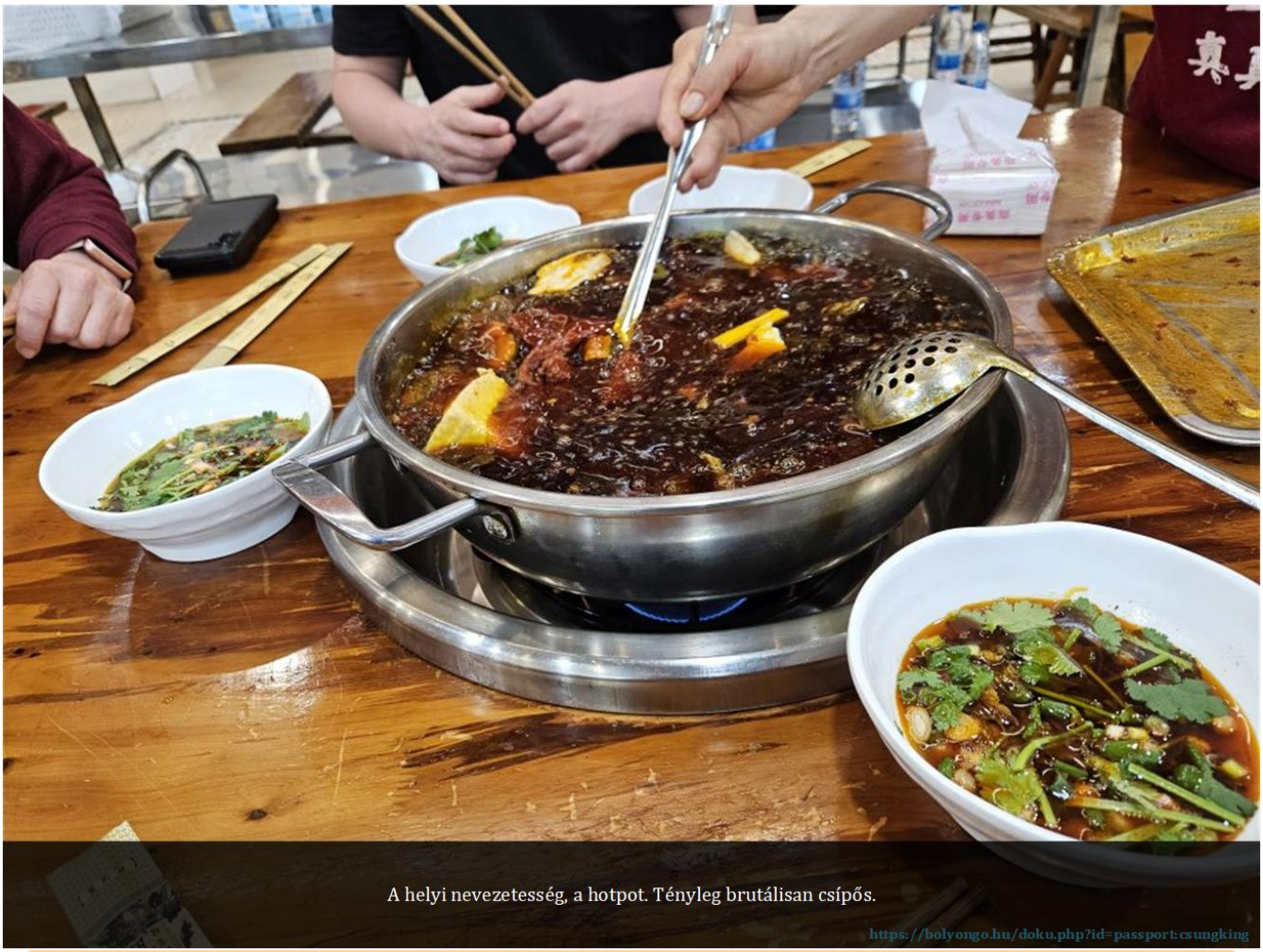


Szinte minden új elektromos autó tetején megtalálható a „búb”, azaz a lidar-egység. Ez azt jelzi, hogy az autó vagy már képes az autonóm vezetésre, vagy legalábbis elő van erre készítve.

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In many places, we came across cars on display whose manufacturers I either didn’t recognise at all or found surprising (such as Huawei). Almost all of them are electric, and most have the distinctive ‘bump’ – the lidar – protruding from the top of the windscreen, suggesting that the car already has self-driving capabilities, or at least that work is underway on them.

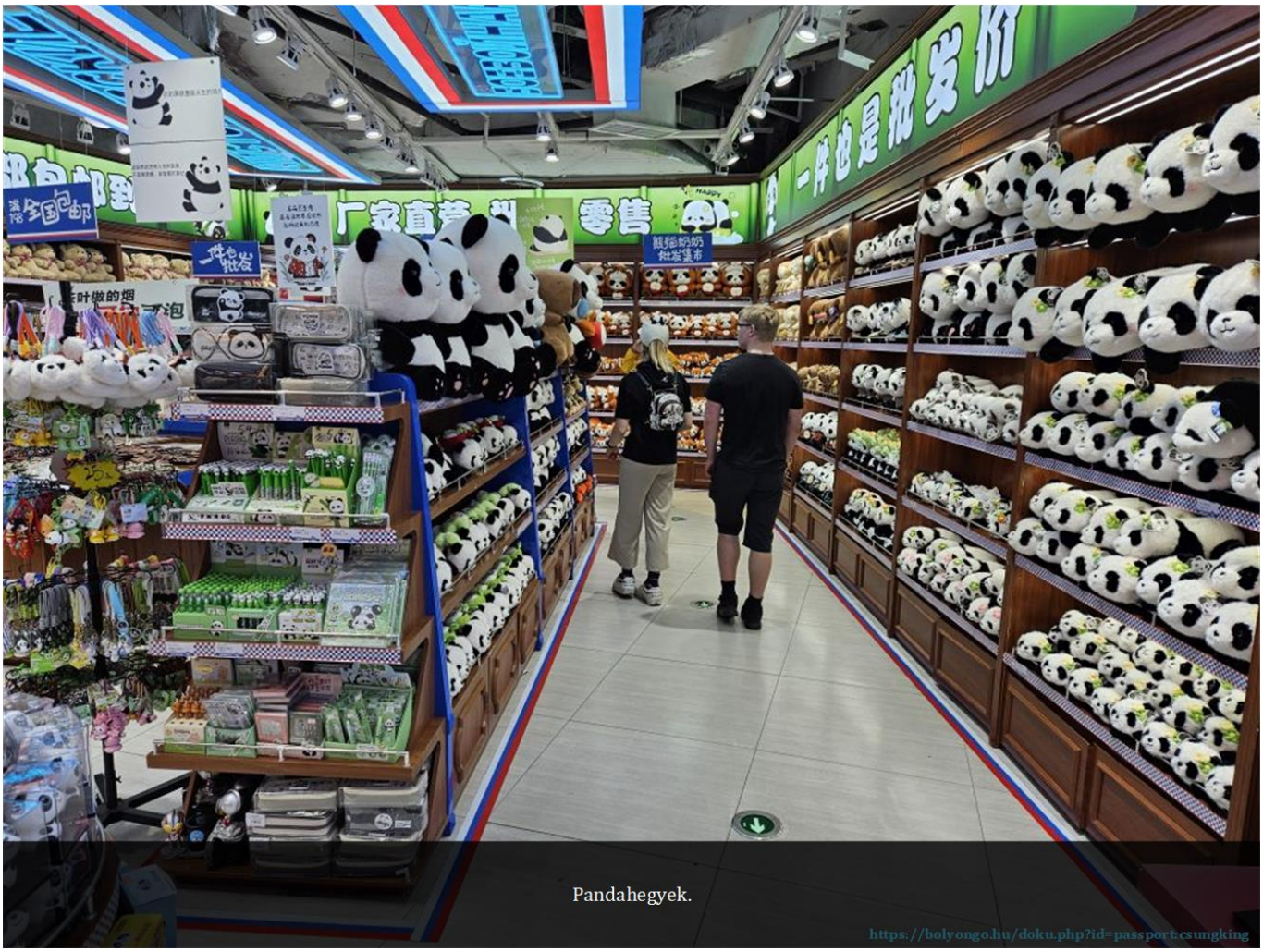
And of course, we tried the local speciality, hotpot. The way it works is that an incredibly spicy broth simmers in a pot in the middle of the table; ingredients selected by us from an extensive list are added to it in small batches, then scooped onto our plates with a ladle. I’m the only one in our family who likes spicy food, but my family stood by me heroically and, with their faces turning redder and redder, proudly tasted their way through the selection. Which, apart from being absolutely brutally spicy, actually *“had an effect”*.



I've put together a public photo gallery from the photos and videos I took; if you're interested, itt you can find it at.

Our experiences, in case you'd also like to visit China

- From 2025, you'll be able to travel to China visa-free for 14 days as a tourist
- A 2-hour layover between flights is far too short. It's worth allowing at least 4 hours.
- It's worth installing the WeChat and Alipay apps on your phone in advance, as you can pay with them almost everywhere. You'll need to link your bank cards to these apps. It's almost impossible to pay by bank card anywhere, and we saw very few ATMs. It's still worth taking some cash with you, as the system sometimes messes up app-based payments.
- Access to Google, YouTube and Facebook is restricted.
- On Google Maps, the satellite imagery and street view are out of alignment; the app doesn't recognise public transport and often fails to identify metro stations.
- People are extremely friendly; if you're looking for something (as there are no signs indicating places of interest), feel free to ask the police officers stationed everywhere – they're very helpful too.
- The subject of politics is generally taboo.
- Food described as 'slightly spicy' is actually incredibly hot, and what's more, it hits you twice.



A great many people still – mostly out of habit – speak disparagingly about the Chinese and Chinese products *“small, cheap”*. I think that time is long past. I order the components, microelectronics and sensors for my home projects from Temu, AliExpress and Banggod. I’m not saying you can’t occasionally stumble across *“a bit of a let-down”*, but I’m generally satisfied with what they deliver, and especially with the price they do it for. And no, this isn’t just about knock-offs. I surprised a lot of people at my company with a second-generation battery test rig I built myself, which contains lithium-ion modules, a fully integrated battery management system (BMS) and is made entirely from components sourced from AliExpress.

China is developing at the same pace as Germany – in reverse. Europe has become preoccupied with its internal problems – whether self-inflicted or thrust upon it – and we fail to realise that we have indeed fallen fatally behind in the technological race. I know China has its own problems too, but for now I’m just writing what I see. According to my son, Chongqing looks like New York in about ten years’ time.

The latest posts on the blog

The story of Route 18’ (07 Aug 2026)
Point Nemo (04 Aug 2026)
LAWS (31 July 2026)
The Ozempic War (22 July 2026)
Half an hour left of your life (19 July 2026)
How thick is your book? (11 July 2026)

Orwell was wrong; bureaucracy has triumphed (5 July 2026)
Russia’s hybrid warfare against the European GNSS system (27 June 2026)
Ebola outbreak in the Congo (28 May 2026)
When a solar power station turns the desert into an oasis (13 May 2026)
Boeing 737 MAX / MCAS (5 May 2026)
The shadow of Chernobyl: Forty years after the disaster (26 April 2026)
The trivial disaster of the Mars Climate Orbiter (MCO) programme (24 April 2026)
Therac-25: The error message nobody understood (19 April 2026)
When the King is the co-pilot (17 April 2026)
Chongqing, the world’s largest city (6 May 2025)

2026/07/16 13:11 · vamsan

Dear reader! If you’ve got this far in your reading, I think I’m fair in assuming that you haven’t found this post entirely uninteresting. Oh, please don’t close the tab just yet; I’m not trying to squeeze any money out of you.

All I’m asking is that if you know anyone with whom you could have a good discussion about what’s written here, or if you’d simply like to share it with them, please don’t hesitate!

I’m still looking for opportunities to get my writing published. If you have any ideas, please do share them with me! My contact details can be found in the the Legal Notice section at.

The only platform on which passport.blog is currently published is Facebook. If you’d like to be notified of new posts, follow the Bolyongó Facebook page.

If you’d like to print this post or save it separately, the easiest way is to convert it to PDF format. You can do this using the fourth icon from the top on the right-hand side (Adobe).

Previous posts on bolyongó.hu

All posts, sorted alphabetically, indexe can be found here. Posts on the blog that are linked to specific locations can also be found on Google Maps: The true wonders of the world.

2026/07/15 22:45 · vamsan
Diary of a trip, trip, Chongqing, China, 2025

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