

China

This guide is compiled from the IAM Country Guide for reference only. Customs regulations change frequently; please consult your Seapoe relocation consultant for the latest requirements before shipping.

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Documents

Documents required for importing used household goods, personal effects, and related shipments.

For Foreign Passport Holders

- Passport with Residence Permit (valid period no less than 1 full year)
- Work Permit (valid period no less than 1 full year)
- Employment Approval Letter from the Foreign Expert Bureau (required in Beijing)
- Representative Card (required for foreign representative office personnel)
- Application Form with client's signature and company's chop (stamp)
- Inventory packing list and OBL/AWB for all incoming shipments
- Baggage Declaration Form (two copies, completed identically, stamped by Customs at the Red Channel upon arrival in China). Required by some cities only; for Shanghai, Wuhan, and Nanjing this is needed only for air shipments. In Shanghai, this can be waived for air shipments if the client holds a resident and work permit valid for a full year.
- Copy of property deed or rental contract in China
- If shipment originates from a country different from the client's nationality: original visa showing at least 1 year residence in that country, or an explanation letter
- For Shanghai employment: business certificate copy and certificate of employment with original HR department stamp
- For Shanghai students: student card and school/university enrollment letter
- Printout of client's entry record into mainland China for the last 2 years (issued by the PSB -- Public Security Bureau)

For Returning Chinese Citizens

- Original passport showing a stay of at least 1 year abroad (or more than 6 months for air shipments)
- Printout of client's entry record into mainland China for the last 2 years (issued by PSB)
- Declaration of Unaccompanied Luggage stamped by airport Customs upon arrival into China
- Copy of property deed or rental contract in China
- For Beijing: if passport was not issued in Beijing or client was not born in Beijing, a company letter proving the workplace is Beijing, or a lease contract valid for 1 year

For Diplomats

- Diplomatic Card
- Passport
- Original AWB or OBL with embassy's chop (consignee must be the Embassy)
- Shipment arrival notice from local shipping agent
- Inventory packing list with embassy's chop
- Application form with authorized signature from Embassy and embassy's chop

Specific Information

One shipment rule: Only one sea shipment and one air shipment are allowed per residence permit. If both sea and air shipments are planned, import permit applications for both must be submitted at the same time. Any additional shipment (even years later) is 100% dutiable.

If the shipper has previously imported a shipment into China, the new shipment will be subject to full customs duty. This is strictly enforced.

Import permit: Required for all shipments. Takes approximately 2-3 working days to process and is valid for 30 days after issuance. All items listed and approved may be imported within 6 months.

Import deadline: The import of personal effects must be arranged at least 6 months before the expiration of the residence permit. For returning citizens, shipments must be imported within 180 days of return to mainland China.

Duty rates for air shipments are usually 30% higher than for sea shipments.

Electronic documents: As of August 1, 2018, China accepts electronic documents for customs clearance.

Items NOT recommended for shipment:

- Alcoholic beverages (extremely high import duties; prohibited in air shipments to most cities; prohibited entirely in Beijing and Shenzhen; only Shanghai and Nanjing currently allow alcohol via sea, with severe quantity restrictions)
- Food items, cosmetics, health products, and toiletries in air shipments
- Medicines
- Fax machines and photocopy machines (not allowed in personal shipments to Shanghai)

Alcohol restrictions (city-specific):

- Shanghai: 4 bottles permitted for foreign passport holders (2 duty-free, 2 taxed); 2 bottles for Chinese returnees (1 duty-free, 1 taxed). A bottle is defined as 75 cl maximum; a 1L bottle counts as 2.
- Beijing: No alcohol permitted in shipments.
- Shenzhen: Alcohol import prohibited.
- Diplomats: 300 bottles/person/year for alcohol 12-22%; 100 bottles/person/year for alcohol above 22%.
- Other cities: varies; contact destination agent.

Food restrictions: Dry goods only, in original/sealed packaging, canned or vacuum packed. No fresh food, dairy, eggs, honey, unprocessed grains, seeds, nuts, live plants/bulbs, or perishables. Milk powder, chicken/beef extract, meat products and meat by-products are prohibited (including all forms of pet food). Egg-containing products from a list of 21+ countries (including the USA) are subject to confiscation. Shanghai pulls all food from both air and sea shipments.

ISPM 15: All wood packaging material must be heat-treated or fumigated with methyl bromide and properly marked per ISPM 15 standards.

Zika disinfection (shipments from the USA): All shipments from the USA to China must be disinfected due to Zika virus risk. Proof of disinfection must be provided at the destination port.

Asian/Chinese antiques: Must be declared and registered with local Customs for re-export. There is no guarantee such items will be allowed out of China later. Importation of Asian/Chinese antiques is not recommended.

Books and media (returning citizens):

- Books: 10 duty-free; maximum 200 (Beijing) or 50 (Shanghai) with explanation letter
- CDs/DVDs: 20 duty-free; maximum 400 (Beijing) or 100 (Shanghai) with explanation letter
- Subject to 2-3 weeks Customs inspection

Furniture: Import of furniture is banned for returning Chinese citizens. Import may be attempted with an explanation letter and special approval from a senior Customs official.

Grand pianos: Cannot be imported to Shanghai unless the client is a professional musician or music teacher at a conservatory. Can be imported to Beijing with prior Customs approval.

Personal computers: PCs with encryption capabilities require approval of installed software prior to importation. PCs with simple password software (e.g., Microsoft products) are generally acceptable.

Groupage/consolidated shipments: Not allowed to be imported (Shanghai).

Air shipment routing: Air shipments and LCL shipments must NOT transit through any other Chinese airport before reaching their final destination. Shipments that do will likely be returned to origin. This must be communicated clearly to airlines and forwarders.

Duties & Taxes

Import duties -- the key distinction:

- Foreign passport holders (first-time importers): As of a 2020 Ministry of Finance directive (A05920200038), first-time importers holding foreign passports can import their first shipment duty-free in many cities including Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuhan, Qingdao, and Guangzhou. This is based on "reasonable quantities" (e.g., one TV per family member, up to 26-28 golf clubs per family). This regulation is NOT yet applied nationally -- notably it is NOT applied in Beijing, where any item assessed at CNY 5,000 or above per unit is dutiable.
- Chinese passport holders (returning citizens): Duties are always levied on shipments. Any item with a unit price assessed at CNY 1,000 or above is dutiable. The duty-free allowance in Shanghai is RMB 5,000 total (minus the value of accompanied luggage declared at the airport). Books over 10 are dutiable; CDs/DVDs over 20 are dutiable.
- Diplomats: No duties on diplomatic shipments. Normally no Customs inspection, though Customs reserves the right to inspect with Ministry of Foreign Affairs authorization.
- All non-diplomatic shipments: Subject to physical inspection by local Customs. All electrical items must be listed on the inventory with model, serial number, and size.

Prohibited & Restricted Items

Prohibited Items

- Weapons, imitation weapons, and ammunition
- Narcotics and illegal drugs
- Pornographic and politically subversive materials (broadly interpreted; includes content "detrimental to the political, economic, cultural and moral interests of China")
- Counterfeit currencies and negotiable securities
- Fax machines and photocopy machines (in personal shipments to Shanghai)
- Used motorcycles (for non-diplomats)
- All meat products and meat by-products in food (confiscated/destroyed)
- Egg-containing products from the 21-country bird flu list (including the USA)
- Fresh food, dairy, seeds, live plants, perishables
- Grand pianos (Shanghai, unless professional musician) RESTRICTED

Restricted / Dutiable Items

Traveler's duty-free allowances (accompanied baggage):

- 2 bottles of liquor (1.5L total)
- 400 cigarettes (2 cartons)
- Food for personal use
- Wristwatches, cameras, electronic devices for personal use (must not be sold or transferred)
- Foreign currency up to RMB 20,000 equivalent (must be declared)

Dutiable items within household goods shipments:

- All electrical appliances, furniture, lighting fixtures, foodstuffs, golf clubs, wine/alcohol

- For Beijing: any item assessed at CNY 5,000+ per unit (foreign passport holders); CNY 1,000+ per unit (returning citizens)
- Books over 10 (returning citizens)
- CDs/DVDs over 20 (returning citizens)

Personal computers with encryption: Require software approval prior to importation.

CDs/VCDs/DVDs/videotapes: Up to 100 items duty-free for foreign passport holders; subject to 2-3 weeks inspection. Over 20 dutiable for returning citizens.

Consignment Instructions

Recommended: Contact the destination agent to ensure all requirements have been met prior to import. Customs regulations may differ between cities. This is not a formality -- it is essential for China.

Baggage Declaration Form: Upon arrival at a Chinese airport, the shipper must go through the Red Channel and declare their unaccompanied luggage. Customs will stamp the Baggage Declaration Form. Both copies must be completed identically. The stamped copy returned to the shipper must be forwarded to the destination agent. Failure to obtain this form at arrival can prevent or complicate clearance of the household goods shipment.

Import permit timing: After the Residence Permit is issued (approximately 3-4 weeks after arrival with Z visa), the expatriate works through the destination agent to apply for the import permit. Items approved on the import permit may be shipped within 6 months.

Air shipment routing -- CRITICAL: Air shipments and LCL shipments must NOT transit through any other Chinese port before reaching the final destination airport. Misrouted shipments will be returned to origin at the shipper's expense. The airline/forwarder must understand this routing requirement.

Packing list accuracy: Packing lists must be accurate, complete, and sequentially numbered. Customs will compare the physical contents against the inventory. Discrepancies cause delays, fines, and potential confiscation.

Ports of entry: Major sea ports include Shanghai, Tianjin (for Beijing), Guangzhou/Shenzhen, Qingdao, and others. Major airports include Beijing Capital (PEK), Shanghai Pudong (PVG), Guangzhou Baiyun (CAN). For pets requiring quarantine, only designated ports with quarantine facilities may be used.

ISPM 15 compliance is mandatory. Non-compliant shipments will be held.

Disinfection for U.S.-origin shipments: Required due to Zika virus risk. Proof must accompany the shipment.

Currency: Chinese Yuan Renminbi (RMB/CNY). Foreign currency must be declared on arrival if equivalent to RMB 20,000 or more.