



The indie rocker's guide to Nanjing, China

The father of Chinese punk rock, Yang Haisong, shows us around his hometown – a quick day trip from Shanghai.

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‘If you really want to understand Nanjing, you have to stay a little while’, says Yang Haisong, the frontman of the band [P.K. 14](#), one of the most influential indie rock bands in [China](#), mixing post-punk soundscapes and Mandarin lyrics. A native of Nanjing, Haisong formed the band with a group of music-obsessed friends back in 1997, and they’ve gone on to tour the US and Europe, as well as open for the Soundtrack of Our Lives and the (International) Noise Conspiracy. P.K. 14 was even named [one of Asia’s best bands](#) by *Time* in 2007. Today, Haisong lives in Beijing and devotes much of his time to mentoring and producing the next generation of bands – acts like Chui Wan and Birdstriking – and recording with Dear Eloise, his shoegaze act with his wife, Sun Xia. But Haisong still carries hometown pride for the city known as the ‘Southern Capital’.

While China’s big three tourism cities – [Beijing](#), [Shanghai](#) and [Hong Kong](#) – can feel increasingly international, still under-the-radar cities like Nanjing retain their distinctively Chinese character. At just an hour from Shanghai on high-speed train – and the ultra-modern

trains, clocking in at nearly 200 mph, are worth checking out on their own – it’s an easy day trip to a spot with a slower pace, mountain vistas and centuries of history.



Dr Sun Yat-sen’s Mausoleum; photo by Mei Ning

History and breathing room

‘When I was growing up, Nanjing was a relatively quiet and conservative city, still living in the shadow of the 1930s Republic of China era’, says Haisong, referring to the country’s pre-Communist period when the country had just shaken off its imperial past and Nanjing was the capital. He suggests starting with a trip to the serene Purple Mountain, easily accessible via the local subway. Up the mountain sits the mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen, who founded the Republic in 1912 and is considered the father of modern China. Climbing the stairs to the memorial reveals sweeping views: in spring, plum blossoms spread over the mountain, and in fall, ginkgo leaves turn a brilliant shade of yellow. The road winding back to the base passes botanical gardens (with a bamboo forest and lakes dotted with classical pagodas), Ming Dynasty tombs (the famous Stone Elephant Road is lined with pairs of stone statues of camels, lions and, of course, elephants) and Xuanwu Lake (also known as Military Rehearsal Lake), which is now a quiet spot to take a break, but was once where the emperor inspected naval ships.



The band that's been called the Talking Heads of China, P.K. 14; photo by Annika Bassånghjärta

Roots of rock

Growing up, Haisong met friends and bought albums at the Soldiers Club (105 Zhongshan Bei Lu, Gulou District), a former military installation repurposed as a flea market with food stalls, booksellers, karaoke parlors – even a skating rink. A little history: back in the 1990s, unsold tapes and CDs that were meant to be recycled were sent to China with a small notch cut into the casing. Instead, those so-called ‘cut-out’ albums made their way into small record stores around the country and formed the early collections of young rockers like Haisong, who picked up what looked interesting and traded dubbed cassettes of their favourites. And speaking of musical resourcefulness, in the early days of P.K. 14, there were no real venues, so the band arranged shows at universities or small bars. Luckily, today Nanjing has the new Ola Livehouse (3 Yuanguang Lu, Taiyanggong Plaza, Basement Level, Xuanwu District), opened by folk singer Li Zhi. There, you can catch the next generation to follow in P.K. 14’s footsteps – and probably even get to know some of the musicians over a beer.



Inside Librarie Avant-Garde (left) and Stone Elephant Road at Purple Mountain (right)

A book palace

Book shop, performance space and café [Librarie Avant-Garde](#) (173 Guangzhou Lu, Wutaishan Stadium underground garage, Gulou District), near [Nanjing University](#), offers an impressive collection of titles. Hidden in a former bomb shelter and underground parking lot, the space features wide tables for reading and a replica of Rodin's *The Thinker* looking over the space. Though the shop stocks limited English titles, it's worth popping in to soak in the over-the-top surroundings. Later, recharge at [Sculpting in Time](#), an arty Chinese coffeehouse with a location near Nanjing U's south gate (47 Hankou Lu, 2nd Floor, Gulou District).



Nanjing's go-to coffee spot, Sculpting in Time

Local bites

Every Chinese city has signature dishes, and Nanjingers swear their salted duck and Nanjing roast duck rival their more famous crispy cousins found in Beijing. Haisong is also partial to dishes such as stir-fried artemisia and bean curd, and egg and chrysanthemum leaf soup. Nanjing Impressions, with several locations around town, offers solid renditions of all the local classics, catalogued on a bilingual menu. And before taking the train out of town, stop in the new entertainment complex Nanjing 1912 (54 North Taiping Road, Xuanwu District) for a pint of jasmine-infused Baby IPA at Master Gao, run by the local craft brewer Gao Yan. Or make it two – the trains back to [Shanghai](#) run all the time.

Featured image is Yang Haisong (left) and Librarie Avant-Garde (right); photo of Haisong by Tong Chang