

Nerding it up in Beijing

A visit to the Zhongguancun electronics labyrinth



Its vendors range from the clean-cut businessman, eager to flash his card and pitch his sale, to the nerd, T-shirt still sporting signs of last night's ramen noodles, buried under piles of PCBs, soldering iron ready to rewire the guts of his next sale. As China's answer to Silicon Valley and Japan's Akihabara, the area is home to PC maker Lenovo and websites Baidu and SINA; it's also the Chinese base and recruiting station of Microsoft, Sun and NEC. But more than its companies, its marketplace pulls in buyers and vendors from as far as Singapore in search of wholesale prices on geek goods.

This is Zhongguancun: paradise of cameras, computers, games, and occasionally China's otaku.

Its stores are identified by floor and booth number only, stocking everything from the iQue lineup (Nintendo's brand name in China) to knock-off video cards sporting the greatest features the pirates could copy. Entire floors are dedicated to gaming, with as many aisles of new-in-box computer and console games as Blockbuster has of DVDs—the latest and greatest are available for testing on shiny plasma televisions.

Most stores specialize; many go out of business and are replaced instantly. Entire outlets are dedicated to products as specific as sound cards, often with computers and speakers set up to test each card and hear how it synthesizes MIDI, or to see if its output meets audiophile demands.

The escalators end in a food court and elevators take over to service the top floors, occupied by brand-name shops full of Canon and Nikon cameras, fancy printers and high-cost products that professionals and offices need. Costly ground floor space is claimed by Acer, Samsung, Sony and Gateway showrooms.

As in the legendary Near Eastern markets, bargaining is the rule rather than the exception. Vendors are sharp, and it takes some clever conversation and witty comments to nab the best price. But even without haggling, prices on domestic-made or illegally-imported goods would put to shame most US-based Internet outlets.

But this is today. As recently as 20 years ago,



Zhongguancun was a dusty area with dirt roads that really put the *cun* (Chinese for "village") in its name. Its transformation into a technology park was masterminded by Chen Chunxian, a Chinese Academy of Sciences member who was inspired after witnessing the close ties shared between Silicon Valley and Stanford University. The area became a household name in the 1980s, and was the place to get a tower assembled when personal computers first became accessible to working-class Chinese families a decade later.

Zhongguancun is fed by the nearby Tsinghua and Peking universities, China's top producers of engineers and scientists. Many of the area's start-ups originated as the brainchild of a professor or student. The shopping centers provide an outlet for students to see—and occasionally test drive—the latest gadgets.

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GETTING THERE:

Beijing bus numbers 323, 384, 304, 386, 630, 725, 804, 826, 851, 941 and 944 offer service to Zhongguancun. The subway line to the park remains incomplete, but visitors can ride Line 13 to the Wudaokou station and walk west down Chengfu Lu and south down Zhongguancun Dajie, a distance of about two miles.