

FEATURED INSIGHT

Digitalization of China Attestation

By the Alvan Liu & Partners team

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China is moving its document attestation regime online, replacing paper-bound consular legalization with electronic apostilles and digital verification portals that cut turnaround times for cross-border business.

For decades, having a foreign document recognised in Mainland China meant navigating a slow, paper-bound chain of notarization, authentication and consular legalization. Each step added cost, delay and the ever-present risk that a single missing stamp would send a file back to the start. Following China's accession to the Hague Apostille Convention in November 2023, that landscape is changing quickly, and the next phase of reform is unmistakably digital.

From paper chains to digital channels

The apostille replaced multi-step consular legalization with a single certificate issued by a competent authority in the document's country of origin. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and authorised provincial Foreign Affairs Offices now issue and accept apostilles, and they are increasingly doing so through electronic systems. The electronic apostille (e-APP) pairs a digitally issued certificate with an online register that any receiving party can use to confirm the certificate's authenticity in seconds, without handling the physical document at all.

What digital attestation means in practice

For businesses incorporating subsidiaries, registering trademarks, enforcing judgments or onboarding foreign personnel, the shift to digital attestation delivers tangible advantages:

- **Speed:** Turnaround that once took weeks of courier and embassy time can now be measured in days.
- **Verifiability:** Online registers let receiving authorities validate a certificate instantly, reducing the scope for forged or altered documents.
- **Cost:** Removing consular fees and physical handling lowers the per-document cost of cross-border compliance.

Practical considerations

Digitalization is not yet uniform. Acceptance of electronic apostilles varies between provincial authorities and receiving institutions, and some Chinese government bodies, banks and courts continue to request a paper original alongside its digital counterpart. Documents originating outside the Convention's member states still require the traditional legalization route. Businesses should therefore confirm the receiving authority's current requirements before relying solely on a digital certificate, and retain certified copies where a transaction's value or sensitivity warrants it.

The direction of travel, however, is clear. As China expands its electronic apostille infrastructure and more authorities connect to shared verification portals, document attestation will become faster, cheaper and harder to falsify. Companies that adapt their internal compliance processes now, building digital verification into their onboarding and corporate-filing workflows, will be best placed to move at the speed the new system allows.

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