U.S. Tourism Agreement Could Create Chinese Deluge

November 22, 2007 from All Things Considered

MELISSA BLOCK, host: Expected soon at U.S. airports, Chinese tourists – lots of Chinese tourists. Over the past few years, Chinese tour groups have become a common sight at landmarks around the world, but not in the U.S. Up until now, the Chinese authorities haven’t given official approval for groups to travel here.

As NPR’s Anthony Kuhn reports from Beijing, that may be about to change.

(Soundbite of Chinese tour group)

ANTHONY KUHN: The Chinese tour groups streaming out of Beijing’s Forbidden City are instantly recognizable – sporting identical baseball caps and tote bags, snapping pictures and cheerfully chatting in their thick provincial accents. Many of them have read reports in the local media that the U.S. and China are expected to sign an agreement this year that will allow Chinese tour groups to go to the U.S.

Cheng Jung Gua(ph) is the young civil servant from Southern China.

Mr. CHENG JUNG GUA (Civil Servant, China): (Chinese spoken)

KUHN: The U.S. is such a big and wealthy country, he says. As long as we can afford it, I think we would all want to go. Yao Ming Jen(ph), a 53-year-old pharmacist, is even more enthusiastic.

Ms. YAO MING JEN (Pharmacist): (Chinese spoken)

KUHN: I want to go to your United States, she blurts out. Mr. Chen and Mrs. Yao are pretty well traveled inside China, something that would have been unthinkable a generation ago.

Jiang Wei(ph), a vice general manager at the China Travel Service, says that Chinese have only recently discovered the joys of travel.

Mr. JIANG WEI (Vice General Manager, China Travel Service): (Through translator) Chinese didn’t really start traveling overseas until the early 1990s. As consumers’ demand rise, it's natural that Chinese increasingly want to travel domestically and overseas.

KUHN: In the early ’90s, cheap package tours to Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia were all the rage. China made Europe an approved destination for tour groups in 2004. The list of approved destinations now includes more than 130 countries, but not the U.S.

Last year, thirty-four and a half million Chinese traveled overseas according the National Tourist Administration, but only 320,000 of them - less than 1 percent - went to the U.S.

Tina Yao is chief representative of the Hawaii Tourism Authority’s office in Shanghai. She explains China’s justification for having to approve tourist destinations.

Ms. TINA YAO (Director, Public Relations, Hawaii Tourism Authority, Shanghai): (Through translator) If there weren’t some sort of unified management and the market were thrown
open at once, foreign travel agencies might not be able to cope with the influx of Chinese tourists.

KUHN: Rich Harrill, director of Sloan Travel & Tourism Center at the University of South Carolina, says U.S. businesses could thrive on the Chinese tourist boom if they're ready for it.

Dr. RICH HARRILL (Director, University of South Carolina Sloan Travel & Tourism Center): I don't think that our U.S. destinations are prepared. You know, this will be, for some places, a deluge of people. And there is very little preparedness on this from a supply side. And, you know, the whole purpose is to help U.S. destinations be competitive, so these tourists will have choices of - to go somewhere else in the world.

KUHN: Lacking a formal agreement between the two governments, many Chinese companies currently take tour groups to the U.S. disguised as business delegations.

Businessman Yang Jun(ph) runs a company that organizes such groups. He says that his customers are often put off by the difficulty of getting U.S. visas.

Mr. YANG JUN (Businessman): (Chinese spoken)

KUHN: I have discussed it with my colleagues, he says. They all feel that Americans are actually not so open. They imagine that Chinese tourists will stay in the U.S. and not return home, but I don’t think it’s like that.

Yang says that as Chinese become wealthier, they are less impressed by what they see in the U.S. and less tempted to stay illegally. Yang himself just got back from San Francisco, which he first visited more than a decade ago. He said he was disappointed to see that compared to China, where new cities spring up practically overnight, San Francisco hadn't really changed at all.

Anthony Kuhn, NPR News, Beijing.