

INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune

Chinese tourists getting a bad image

By **Wayne Arnold** The New York Times
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SINGAPORE There was near-pandemonium at the L'Oréal cosmetics counter. With only hours before the end of their weeklong National Day holiday this month, a busload of package tourists from China descended on a department store here and began clamoring for all the skin refiner and "wrinkle de-crease" they could buy.

Karen Eu, one of three clerks attending to them and herself of Chinese ancestry, opened her eyes wide in exasperation.

"Oh, my God," she said as she carried another fistful of Chinese yuan to the cash register. "They talk so loud I have to yell until my throat hurts."

China's rapid economic growth has fostered a tourist boom among the mainland Chinese, with Southeast Asia the favorite destination, at least for now.

The surge in package tour groups from China, an important source of income for the region, is also giving rise to an unflattering stereotype: the loud, rude and culturally naïve Chinese tourist.

Sound familiar? The tide of travelers from China mirrors the emergence of virtually every group of overseas tourists since the Romans, from Britons behaving badly in the Victorian era and ugly Americans in postwar Europe to the snapshot-happy Japanese of the 1980s.

So it is not much of a surprise that tourists from mainland China, often going abroad for the first time, are leaving similar complaints in their wake.

But China is also manufacturing its own twist on the age-old tale, as became apparent in July when a group of more than 300 from China took umbrage at illustrations of a pig's face on their check-in vouchers at a casino resort in predominantly Muslim Malaysia.

Although the resort said the drawings were meant only to distinguish their Chinese guests from Muslims, who cannot eat pork - or gamble - the Chinese demonstrated their pique by staging a sit-in in the hotel lobby and belting out their national anthem. It took 40 police officers with dogs to clear them out.

Earlier that month, a group of mainland tourists staged a similar protest on a flight to Hong Kong from Bangkok after a departure delay kept them from making a day trip in Singapore.

So far, only an estimated 2 percent of China's population ventures abroad each year, according to a recent report on China tourism by CLSA Emerging Markets in Hong Kong. But the World Tourism Organization predicts that China will become the fourth-largest source of overseas tourists by 2020.

Groups from China began traveling to Europe last year.

And if the United States agrees to grant visas to China's tourists, analysts say it will undoubtedly be a top draw.

Clean and safe, Singapore, with its large Mandarin-speaking population, attracts more Chinese tourists than any of its Southeast Asian neighbors. Some Chinese visitors are the newly rich from big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, and they stay in five-star hotels. Benefiting from rising incomes and more direct air connections, however, an increasing majority comes from the new middle class in China's provincial capitals.

The typical visit to Singapore is just three days. The average income is still below \$2,000 a year, and most tourists from China sign up for \$250 package tours that whisk them through as many as five countries in a week.

Many of these tours are what the industry calls "zero-dollar tours," providing no profit margin. Instead, the agents make their money by diverting their groups to jewelers or restaurants that give them a commission on sales.

While some analysts say China's tourists have dubious benefits to regional tourism, others argue that they have a broader economic impact. Unlike Westerners or Japanese, who splurge on expensive resorts, they say that the Chinese devote a

greater proportion of their vacation time to sightseeing and shopping.

China's tourists stand apart from other tourists in other ways, say members of Singapore's hospitality industry. "They're more demanding," said Johnson Lim, who handles groups from China for a local travel agency.

Boon Sang Lip, a souvenir stand operator, put it more bluntly: "They like to talk in a loud and not-very-polite way," he said as a group of tourists from Xian in China mobbed his assistant for lighters in the shape of Singapore's emblem, the mythical half-lion, half-fish Merlion.

When they check into hotels, for instance, many tourists from China demand the top floors, Lim said. Some feel entitled to take souvenirs like hotel pillows, he said.

Chinese officials had nothing to say on behalf of their compatriots traveling overseas. The Foreign Ministry referred questions on the matter to the China National Tourism Administration, which regulates and promotes outbound tourism as well as domestic tourism, but officials there did not respond to requests for comment.

None of this may come as a surprise to anyone who has traveled through China. In a country of 1.3 billion people, getting where you want to go often means literally pushing someone else out of the way.

But much of the behavior stems from inexperience. Chinese nationals may travel only to countries on a government-approved list. Individual travel, while possible, requires onerous paperwork, so most Chinese travel in large groups.

China's labor laws also require most citizens to take their vacations around three major holidays: the Lunar New Year holiday in late January and early February; May Day; and National Day on Oct. 1, which initiates a weeklong vacation period.

For all the challenges, China's tourist migrations represent a lucrative source of income that countries like Singapore are vying to attract.

Casinos are one case in point. With casinos illegal in China, virtually every trip abroad includes such a visit. Gambling losses by Chinese nationals overseas amount to \$72 billion a year, according to CLSA.

Singapore lifted its own 40-year ban on casinos this year and is now seeking bids to build two integrated casino resorts.

But officials deny they are pandering to China's love of gambling.

"Yes, there may be a group of Chinese tourists interested in gambling facilities," said Edmund Chua, regional director for China at the Singapore Tourism Board, "but the majority we're getting now are nongambling tourists, families and travelers who are here just to have fun."

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