

Chinese Tourists and the Reality of Faux Pas

Chinese in America have a long history of struggle. Over the past 30 years, hundreds of thousands of people from China have traveled to the US to study and/or to work. Many of them have returned, and some have stayed back to become contributing members of American society. But unlike in the past, the overall image of Chinese in the US today is more or less positive.

One can readily list laudable examples, big and small, of how naturalized Chinese Americans have excelled in their fields and made positive contributions to the government, science and technology, industry, the financial and educational systems, and the arts in the US. The appointments of Washington Governor Gary Locke as US secretary of commerce and Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Chu as secretary of energy come easily to mind.



The increased presence of Chinese working as financial professionals in New York has given rise to a joke about Wall Street being turned into a workaday "Chinatown".

In New York's real Chinatown, public schools near the Confucius Plaza have become the embodiment of educational excellence due, in part, to the diligence of their students. This fact has induced many non-Chinese parents to relocate to Chinatown, so that their children can receive quality education alongside their Chinese peers. Here, one is reminded of how Mencius' mother shifted house thrice 2,300 years ago to ensure her son got the best education and helped him become one of China's pivotal cultural icons.

More Chinese tourists can also be seen in the US today. They are everywhere from New York and Washington D.C. to Miami and San Francisco. They are a welcome presence in the great American malls, for they make small but useful contributions to the revival of the US economy.

This brings the image of Chinese tourists sauntering across the world. Chinese people traveling abroad are a surprising phenomenon today. In 2007, about 37 million of them traveled overseas, which was a six-fold increase from 1995 and 50-fold from 1985. The World Travel Organization estimates that 100 million Chinese tourists would travel abroad every year by 2020. This key social and economic fact is hard to ignore.

Overseas travel is a new experience for Chinese. It reflects their newfound wealth, higher standard of living and increasing personal freedom. But these positive traits are overshadowed by a problem: the

"uncouth behavior" of Chinese tourists, especially when they travel abroad. Actions like jumping queues and talking loudly in public imply cross-cultural insensitivity, a lack of appreciation for local customs and ignorance of the subtle difference between private and public space.

In 2006, the Chinese government launched a three-year campaign to "enhance the civil quality of tourist behavior", as part of which an intensive tourist educational campaign was implemented in cooperation with tour operators and transport providers. Though much progress has been made, the work is not yet finished.



Why Chinese tourists behave the way they do? There are many explanations. Closer in time, observers have mentioned the effects of the "cultural revolution" (1966–76). Further back in time, an academic even traced the behavior to the emergence of the jianghu culture (the Robin Hood-and-his-band-of-merry-men kind of society-outside-society) during the middle reign of Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

Whatever the real reasons, two general circumstantial conditions must be recognized. First, people will commit cross-cultural faux pas whenever they encounter unfamiliar cultures. Cultural shock has its behavioral ripples. Every Western tourist in China would have at least one faux pas story to tell. Despite precautions, business travelers keep committing gaffes in China, sometimes with costly consequences.

But Chinese tourists tend to commit faux pas en masse. When people are isolated culturally in a foreign land, their behavior tends to wobble. But then Chinese tourists also display similar behavior at home, which brings us to the second circumstantial condition.

When people acquire wealth suddenly, more likely than not their behavior shows nouveau riche traits, which include ostentation and haughty arrogance. This is reality, and has been rampant across the globe throughout human history.



Currently, a Chinese traveling overseas spends an average of \$1,000 on luxury goods. Conspicuous

consumption connotes power, the false sense of which often leads to haughty arrogance, which, when crudely expressed, could end up as tasteless, philistine kind of behavior.

But with the passage of time, the average Chinese tourist will become comfortable with his/her wealth and with other cultures. Once that happens, Chinese travelers will gradually shed the traits they are associated with today. And to achieve that, we should continue our educational efforts.

Chinese Tourists' Bad Behavior to Be Curbed

With more and more Chinese tourists traveling abroad, other countries are becoming increasingly uncomfortable when confronting Chinese tourists' bad behavior. China National Tourism Administration and the central government's Office of the Spiritual Civilization Development Steering Commission have released a list of "dos and don'ts" for citizens intending to travel abroad. The move aims to promote civilized behavior among Chinese travelers and restore the country's image, which has been tarnished by the behavior of some Chinese tourists.

"Littering", "spitting", "snatching bus seats", "queue-jumping", "taking off shoes and socks in public", "speaking loudly", "bad temper and cursing", "smoking in non-smoking areas" and many others are listed in "The Frequent Bad Behaviors of Chinese Citizens Who Travel Abroad", enumerating complaints by netizens. China.org.cn

Photos: TR, Flickr

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