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Attracting China to the Massachusetts and New England tourist market

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Massachusetts labels Chinese tourists as an "emerging market." There is no direct flight from China to Boston. Current visa policies make it hard for Chinese to get here. There are no official marketing materials (not even a single map!) produced in Chinese by any New England-based governmental tourism agency about Boston or other local destinations. Yet in 2011, without a direct flight from China or any tourist information in Chinese, and without the relaxed visa policies that were announced earlier this year, Chinese tourists ranked third among international visitors to Massachusetts, just behind the UK and Canada, representing a 12.8% market share. Since Chinese tourists spent an estimated \$7.7 billion in the US in 2011, it is very likely that well over \$300 million of that amount was spent in Massachusetts alone. It appears the market is not "emerging," but rather has "emerged" and is burgeoning in a big way.

While in the U.S., Chinese spend more than any other tourist. In 2011, they spent \$7000 per tourist, per trip. Furthermore, again in 2011, Chinese accounted for 62% of all luxury brand goods purchased in Europe and 33% in the U.S. What is their appetite for our food? While Japanese tourists, for example, typically prefer smaller portion sizes, part of the overall travel experience for Chinese tourists includes ordering a large amount and variety of food at restaurants to share it in real time with family at the table, and later in virtual time through stories with friends back home, a huge part of their tourism culture. Chinese also take vacation on different holidays than their U.S. and European counterparts, which means they aren't displacing other potential guests during peak occupancy periods for U.S. and European holiday travel. With over 1 million Chinese tourists in the U.S. in 2011, and with this number already rising dramatically toward 2 million as we head into the end of 2012, official tourism agencies, destination hotels and restaurants in New England have a huge incentive to compete for a healthy share of the very lucrative Chinese tourism market. But how will they compete?

While the hospitality industry has embraced and used the increasing leverage of the internet and social media to drive guest stays and restaurant reservations, and while it has become the norm for prospective U.S. and European guests to check ratings and search for destinations on the internet, these factors, at the moment, quite literally do not translate into Chinese. China has no Google. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are banned and therefore inaccessible to the Chinese traveler. Despite the absence of these tools, ever-increasing numbers of Chinese travelers are somehow managing to find their way here. What if our industry took proactive steps to make it easier for them to get where they would like to go?

Imagine you're an American tourist planning a trip to Europe and your first stop is Rome. You can't wait to bring your partner to the most romantic hotel in Rome. What's your first step in researching

this? While you might consult a travel agent or ask friends, more likely than not you will use your favorite internet search engine and plug "most romantic hotel in Rome" or a variant on the same question. The results you're going to get are, not surprisingly, in English. If you're searching in English on an English search engine, English results come up first. So in this scenario, the Italian hotel in Rome that has searchable marketing materials in English referring to "the most romantic hotel in Rome" will come up in your search. Your hotel might not be the "most romantic hotel in Rome", however, if you conducted your search in Italian on Google.it, but since you do not speak Italian, and search results yielding websites in Italian would be unintelligible to you, you'll never know.

Chinese tourists are no different. They also research destinations online. In fact, roughly 80% of all Chinese tourists research hotels online before booking. Just like our American tourist searching in English for romantic hotels in Rome, Chinese are searching on their domestic search engine, Baidu.com, in Chinese. Perhaps they're searching "Luxury Hotel Boston" just like an American would, but they are doing it in Chinese on their own native search engine and finding results in Chinese. They are not reading our industry's English websites because they will not find them, and even if they did, they would not understand them. If they can't find us or understand us through their preferred means, they are much less likely to end up staying and spending their travel budget with us, even if they would very much have been inclined to do so.

Chinese are searching in Chinese about American destinations on their native search engine and getting results in Chinese. Who is winning in this scenario? Just like the romantic hotel in Rome that has a website in English, the destinations in America that have searchable, search-engine-optimized Chinese content on Baidu are going to be the winners when Chinese tourists search for keywords like "nicest hotel in Cambridge" or "best seafood restaurant in America."

Of course, there's more to it than just presence. Our industry must convince and attract Chinese tourists in a much different way from their American and European counterparts. We need to understand Chinese culture and appeal to it. Chinese tourists are not looking at our websites to find out what time the gym is open. They are not looking to make sure a full Chinese breakfast is offered at the hotel (after all, they didn't come to America to eat any destination's Chinese food, since it probably isn't as good as what they get at home). They aren't worried about the square footage of a hotel room. In fact, Chinese tourists spend the least amount of their time in the hotel room, so focusing on other, more important aspects that appeal to Chinese tourists is the best place to begin. What are they looking for, and is there a secret sauce to season our approach? They are looking for us to create an enticing and attractive online space that will make them comfortable booking with us from 12,000 miles away. The secret sauce involves knowing the makeup of any particular target market in China and what that target market wants to hear from us. Are we trying to attract group tours or wealthy individual tourists? Do we wish to host tourists looking for an educational experience or a relaxing/adventure experience? Bear in mind that, in a country with well over a billion individuals, there are larger-than-average, unique niche markets to target. Our task is to create a presence in China that resonates with the particular target market for which we have decided our destination will have appeal.

While the huge demand for our product, coupled with the increasing disposable wealth of those who desire to buy it, would seem to render our task simple enough, the devil, as always is in the details. First, most of us do not speak or write Chinese, let alone understand the differences among the many dialects in China or the cultural diversity attached to them, as readily as we would grasp the

difference between "pahking the cah" and rooting for "da Bears." Even if we did, we would find that before we established a native online presence in China, we would have to file to qualify to do business in China, a process rife with expense, delay and uncertainty. Would we find room for all of these sunk soft costs in our destination's budget? Probably not—and neither would our competition. Which explains why, when a Chinese tourist searches "luxury Boston hotel" in Chinese on Baidu.com, only one hotel in Boston will appear on the first two pages of results. Good for the particular hotel, but bad overall for our industry in New England. Chinese are passionately curious about our nation and its history. New England has a huge advantage in leveraging that passion, but we need to be doing a better job of using that leverage at all levels, from government to chamber of commerce, from individual hotels and restaurants to brands and chains.

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