

OUR REGION

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LOCKE | History Draws Visitors

Region ripe for Chinese tourism

NEW RULES FOR TOUR GROUPS FAVOR U.S. TRIPS

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From its gambling hall-museum to the Chinese School financed by Sun Yat Sen's Chinese National Party in 1915, the old Delta town of Locke is expected to attract thousands of new Chinese tourists.

Relaxed travel rules between the United States and China have opened the door

to Chinese tour groups for the first time.

The new rules could mean tens of millions of dollars for Northern California, a gateway for Chinese coming to America ever since the Gold Rush.

Before the new rules, Chinese were allowed to visit the United States only on business, to see relatives or by special invitation from uni-

versities or other public institutions. Under a U.S.-China agreement reached in December, Chinese tourists can now come on organized trips to the United States just for leisure.

Last year, more than 40 million Chinese tourists traveled abroad, but only 300,000 came to the United States because of the old visa restrictions, said Defa Tong,

spokesman for the People's Republic of China's Consulate General in San Francisco.

That number is expected to double in the next several years, and with the average tourist spending \$198 a day in the United States, Tong said. "It's a huge market."

The new Chinese tourists could spend as much as \$60 million a year in Sacramento alone, according to data pro-



Clarence Chu stands in Locke's Dai Loy Museum on Tuesday. In the 1940s, about 3,000 Chinese farmers and factory workers lived around Locke, which had fish markets, herb shops, casinos, brothels, boarding houses and the Star Theatre.

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Tourism: 20,000 Chinese could visit

vided by the U.S. Commerce Department and the California Department of Tourism.

Northern California, home to 500,000 Chinese Americans, will likely be a first stop for many of them as it has been for generations. Thousands entered through Angel Island – the Ellis Island of the west – from 1910 through 1940.

Chinese American history starts in San Francisco – called "Gamsan," or Gold Mountain in Cantonese – and Sacramento – known as "Yee Fow," the second city.

Local historian Steve Yee said Sacramento's Chinatown was "a mythical place like Shangri-La" for Chinese headed to the gold fields in the 1840s.

Tens of thousands of Chinese tourists will come here to explore their shared roots, Yee predicted, and learn "the story on the first Asian Americans who moved here to build the transcontinental railroad and moved the waters in this Delta to grow Chinese pears in Courtland and help California feed the world."

"When they finished building the railroads and got kicked out of the mines they knew how to build levees and grow crops," he said.

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Emil Velasquez and Cali Dewald of San Francisco visit Locke on Tuesday. Locke, along the Sacramento River Delta, is expected to be a big draw for an expected surge in Chinese tourists because of its significance to Chinese immigrants in California history.

By the 1990s, Locke was nearly a ghost town until Shanghai painter Ning Hou breathed new life into its rickety streets with his gallery and art school.

But Locke – for all its history and charm – isn't enough for Sacramento to take advantage of the growing tourist market, Yee said.

Yee is leading the charge for the "Yee Fow Center for History, Culture and Trade," which would be located not far from the site of Sacramento's original Chinatown.

"We don't really have a place we can bring Chinese tourists unless you take them to Locke," said Pat Fong-Kushida, president of the 700-member Sacramento Asian Pacific Chamber of Commerce.

Yee, Fong-Kushida and other Asian Americans are hoping a new 240-acre de-

velopment planned for the railyard will include a center honoring Chinese contributions to California.

Still, Sacramento could easily draw 10,000 to 20,000 new Chinese tourists in the next year, said Richard Champley, senior research analyst for the U.S. Department of Commerce.

"They may want to come and see the governor," said Champley.

His agency figures that Chinese visitors typically spend "in the neighborhood of \$6,000 per visitor per trip, including \$3,000-\$4,000 a person on hotels, food and rental cars."

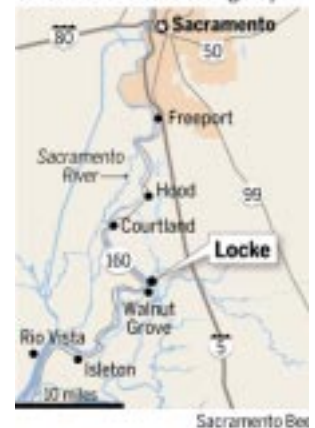
"Sacramento will be one of the top destinations, given the depth and breadth of our history and the cache of our governor and the capital," said Susan Wilcox of the California Department of Tourism. She predicts at least

6,000 to 12,000 new Chinese tourists per year to the region.

Tong, China's consular officer, said he hopes the United States and China will further relax travel rules so that individual Chinese can tour America independently. "Now, if you do it yourself, you have to have a relative here or some business or you

LOCKE TOURISM

The old Delta town of Locke – a national historical site – could be a big draw for the new wave of Chinese tourists expected now that the U.S. and China have relaxed travel restrictions on Chinese leisure tour groups.



can get an invitation from a university," Tong said. "The change is only for tour groups through some qualified travel agency. But it's a good first step."

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