

Bracing for Games, China Sets Rules That Complicate Life for Foreigners

The New York Times
nytimes.com

April 24, 2008

By ANDREW JACOBS

BEIJING — In little more than 100 days, China will open its arms to a deluge of foreigners, many of whom will be pleasantly surprised to find a dizzying array of designer boutiques and painfully hip martini bars that divert expatriates and middle-class Chinese in this once dowdy capital.

But even as Beijing is promising to welcome 1.5 million visitors to the Olympic Games, public security officials are tightening controls over daily life and introducing visa restrictions that are causing anxiety among the 250,000 foreigners who have settled here in recent years.

The visa rules, which were introduced last week with little explanation, restrict many visitors to 30-day stays, replacing flexible, multiple-entry visas that had allowed people to remain for up to a year. The new rules make it harder for foreigners to live and work in Beijing without applying for residency permits, which can be difficult to obtain. The restrictions are also complicating the lives of businesspeople in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore used to crossing the border with ease.

“I can’t begin to explain how serious this is going to be,” said Richard Vuylsteke, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong. “A barrier like this is going to have a real ripple effect on business.”

The government wants to present a blemish-free image of Beijing for the Olympics. Police officers have cleared away street beggars and closed down shops selling pirated DVDs, while also forcing some migrant workers to go back to the countryside.

Over the last month the police have raided bars and clubs suspected of harboring drug dealers. An operation two weeks ago that netted a group of French teenagers has provoked charges of heavy-handed police tactics.

Other restrictions can seem random, like a decision on Wednesday that forced the cancellation of a popular music festival a week before its start. Organizers of the eight-year-old event, the Midi Festival, said officials had told them they were concerned about security. More than 80 bands, many of them from abroad, were scheduled to perform.

But most of the fear and consternation has been prompted by the new visa rules, which have thousands of foreign residents scrambling for black market documents — or contemplating leaving. Residents who in the past could apply locally to extend yearlong tourist or business visas have been instructed to return home and apply for the short-term visas at the Chinese Embassy in their home countries.

Some, like Desmond McGarry, a jazz musician who has lived here since 2002, said they would probably leave. For Mr. McGarry, returning to Canada would mean abandoning his apartment and a network of friends. “It’s been very comfortable until now, even if we existed in a gray zone,” he said. “Maybe I’ll leave and try to come back in the fall when things calm down.”

The new visa rules come at a time of heightened tensions in Beijing and other cities, where public anger has been directed at Western governments and overseas news organizations seen as sympathetic to Tibetan independence. Over the last week, that discontent has fueled demonstrations at the French Embassy in Beijing and at outlets of Carrefour, a French supermarket chain whose executives have been accused of aligning themselves with the Dalai Lama. Some foreign residents are nervously awaiting next Thursday, the first day of a planned Carrefour boycott.

Although the majority of foreigners say they have seen no change in the behavior of their Chinese neighbors and co-workers, some French residents complain that nationalist ire is seeping into their daily lives. One businessman who plays tennis at a Chinese sports club said acquaintances refused to join him on the court last weekend.

More ominously, the owner of a popular French restaurant here said he was denied a visa extension on Wednesday by an official who simply told him, “It’s because you’re French.” The man, who asked that his name and business not be printed for fear of antagonizing the authorities, said he was in a panic. “My whole life is here,” he said.

Most Westerners readily acknowledge that they enjoy privileged lives, including unspoken immunity from the tangle of rules that can complicate the lives of average Chinese.

That may be about to change. Last week English-language signs began appearing on Beijing streets and in high-end apartment buildings directing foreigners not staying in hotels to register with the police. The regulations, which are not new but are rarely enforced, promise steep fines for those who do not comply.

Because the government has not issued formal guidelines about the new visa rules, rumors and uncertainty have been rife, and travel agents say that a handful of tourists have been denied visas without evident rationale.

Cloris Yip, the manager of Smiley Travel in Hong Kong, cited the example of two tourists, a Swiss and a German; the Swiss citizen received a 30-day visa while his German companion was given one for five days. The men, she said, canceled their trip.

“Maybe the Chinese government is not so happy with the Germans right now,” Ms. Yip said. “Maybe they think some foreigners want to protest Tibet during the Games. Either way, you cannot argue or negotiate.”

Businessmen are also feeling powerless. Hong Kong executives accustomed to visiting mainland factories or construction projects every few days are now spending one day each week waiting for new single- or double-entry visas.

“Everyone is affected by it, and they are very unhappy,” said Seth Peterson, a vice president of Techtronic Industries Company, which manufactures vacuum cleaners and power tools in southern China.

Asked about the restrictions, Jiang Yu, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, insisted that there had been no change in visa rules. “The Chinese people will welcome foreign friends in a warm, enthusiastic and open-minded way,” she said during a news conference on Tuesday.

Whether or not these are just temporary measures, those who depend on foreign expertise for their businesses say the impact has been real. Collin Crowell, the managing editor of City Weekend, an English-language entertainment guide in Beijing, said the new requirements were causing consternation among the magazine’s freelance writers.

And Raluca Riquet, an event planner who is organizing art shows for the summer, said she was struggling to find curators with valid visas.

“We’ll find a solution, but it’s not so easy,” said Ms. Riquet, who holds dual French and Romanian citizenship. “The government really wants to control everything and everybody before the Olympics. For us foreigners, it’s a really big change.”