



ESL MiniConference

Visa Regs Shifting for ESL Teachers in China? Or Is It Just Pre-Olympics Jitters?

Tensions are rising in China as the 2008 Olympics season draws near. In early August, a team of six Western protestors (who unfurled a huge banner along a stretch of the Great Wall of China) and a young Canadian-Tibetan blogger (<http://beijingwideopen.org/>) joined forces to distract attention from a ceremonial visit of the 2008 Olympic Committee to Beijing. After a brief stay under official custody, the seven were deported to Hong Kong, and from there traveled safely home to friends and family.

On the Yahoo Group "TEFLChinaJob," a flurry of messages recently surfaced, suggesting that thousands of Westerners teaching English in China also will be facing more careful scrutiny over the coming weeks and months. "Today I received an email from the US Embassy," wrote one group member. "It tells about visa rules being tightened."

The gist of the new, stricter interpretation of regulations by Chinese authorities, according to this message, is that people who travel to China under a tourist visa can no longer convert it to a work visa once they are inside the country. There were several replies suggesting that many ESL programs in China process on-site work permits and get their teachers' tourist visas changed to working visas as a matter of course, but newly hired teachers preparing to fly to China are feeling a little skittish these days.

One way that schools in China are handling the problem is by sending newly arrived teachers back out of the country, to either Macau or Hong Kong, and it is reported that these individuals return promptly with their work visas approved. It was also suggested by several TEFLChinaJob group members that the rule against changing a tourist visa to a work visa is not a new one, and that the current nervous online exchanges regarding this topic are actually a yearly phenomenon. Also, it is rumored that a tourist (L) visa can be converted to a business (F) visa without leaving China, according to one e-mail posting, and then the F visa might be converted to a work (Z) visa or a school might employ a teacher on an F visa, although "it's not totally legal."

"There is not one educational institution in China that can LEGALLY get

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a tourist visa changed to a work visa in mainland China," wrote another teacher, "as it is totally against the law."

There are also new visa services online, according to a ChinaTEFLJob discussion group member, "some of them...offering Z visas for first-time applicants [if you] submit your passport and resume...as well as the contract with your employer." These online sites are supposed to be based in Shanghai and Beijing.

Another e-mail suggested that, although "you should not come to China on a tourist visa and hope to get it changed to a Z visa or residence permit," it is also true that in Xinjiang Autonomous Region and the Karamay District, "because of oil and gas money and the close association with schools, it is easy to change a tourist visa into a Z or a residence permit."

"Confusion arises," said another ESL teacher in China, "because each province has great latitude in interpreting and enforcing the visa laws and the SAFEA (State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs) regulations....Even in strict Liaoning and Jilin, under the right circumstances, the regs have been waived."

"For those law abiding, wishing employment in China, just follow the rules," advised that same ESL teacher, "and [unfounded] rumors of visa changes will have no impact on you." He pointed prospective teachers to several useful Web sites for clear, factual information:

Foreign Expert Regulations

www.safea.gov.cn/english/

www.china-tesol.com/SAFEA_Guide/safea_guide.html

Chinese Visa System Overview

www.china-embassy.org/eng/hzqz/zgqz/default.htm

The warning for U.S. compatriots teaching in China was apparently in response to many Americans who have arrived on tourist visas "pulling midnight runners," which seems to refer to the practice of getting a school to sponsor a work visa and then "running" with the document to a different school.

The 2007-2008 school year in China is certain to be an unforgettable experience for English teachers, their students, and hundreds of thousands of other members of the global community preparing for the 2008 Olympics.

Obviously, the government in China and the people of China are going to be concerned, as hosts, to make their nation as beautiful and welcoming as possible. Yet there is a political side to the Olympics, and both the government and opposition--from "Team Tibet" to pro-democracy forces in Hong Kong and free-spirited Taiwanese-- will be jockeying to position themselves to make political statements at a time when so much attention is focused on this region.

The imaginative protest by those who unfurled the "One World, One Dream, Free Tibet" banners at Mt. Everest several months ago and, more recently, at the Great Wall of China, suggest that the battle of words and ideas leading up to the 2008 Olympics will be pitched on a level never before seen. It is truly a rare opportunity for Westerners and others living and working in China to witness history in the making.

This would seem to be a time to take extreme care in obtaining the correct visa and other documents if you are planning to teach in China.

By Robb Scott
Editor, ESL MiniConference Online
Robb@eslminiconf.net

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