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Amanda Wong, left, of Charles Hotel in Cambridge, Mass., helps Panda Chen Xi of Guangzhou, China.

Welcome, in Mandarin

Hotels Introduce Special Services to Attract Chinese Travelers

By JULIE WEED

Mandarin television channels. Congee rice porridges. Smoking rooms.

China has become the biggest travel spender in the world, and hotels are taking notice. Across Europe and America, back-office planners and front desk clerks are learning Chinese customs to attract the new travelers and keep them returning.

The market is large, and growing. China's economy included \$102 billion spent on travel abroad in 2012, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization. Rising incomes, combined with a relaxation of foreign travel restrictions and the sheer number of citizens, have fueled the Chinese growth.

Scott Taber, a vice president at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, said his company was updating its employee training and guest offerings to meet the 76 percent increase in travelers from mainland China over the previous year. Bellmen, reception clerks and telephone operators are being trained to pronounce Chinese names and offer Chinese newspapers, translated welcome materials and green tea in rooms at hotels in Paris, London, Los Angeles and other cities.

"We operate six hotels in mainland China and have learned cultural expectations and preferences from our experience with guests there," Mr. Taber said. The Medallia company, which created the customer feedback system for Four Seasons, has translated it into Mandarin so Chinese guests could provide feedback worldwide.

At a minimum, hotels that hope to attract and retain Chinese business teach their front desk staff and reservations agents basic cultural information. Guests from China are not assigned to rooms that include the number four, which is considered unlucky because it sounds like the word for death. Chinese business practices and management hierarchy influence room assignments, so managers need to be assigned to a higher floor than their team, or given a high-

er room number.

Some hotel chains formalize these amenities and services under names like JW Marriott's Li Yu, meaning "To Serve with Courtesy." As part of this program, The JW Marriott London Grosvenor House staffs a Chinese welcome desk for group arrivals, offers Chinese-labeled bathroom products and supplies a Chinese do-not-disturb sign.

The Hilton Worldwide website lists hotels where its Huanying or "welcome" program is offered, including 19 in Europe and 29 in America. Guests of Conrad Hotels and Resorts can use the Conrad Concierge mobile app to choose Chinese television channels, mini-bar foods

Accommodating cultural differences to please a big and growing market.

and other amenities, in Mandarin, on their mobile phone before they arrive.

Sales and reservation departments are also adapting. At the Waldorf-Astoria New York, Robert Armstrong, the sales manager, quotes all-inclusive pricing, with taxes and breakfast, to Chinese guests who ask about reservations, because they are accustomed to that type of pricing in China. He also asks which guests need to stay on a smoking floor. Chinese business groups often travel together, so the staff greets them at the entrance when they arrive.

The Preferred Hotel Group, which oversees 650 luxury hotels, says the number of Chinese guests and their average room rates has increased. "Chinese travelers have also started coming without tour groups, and so we are seeing a shift from traditional wholesale rates," said Casey Ueberroth, senior vice president for marketing.

To market to these individual travelers, the company is starting a program called "China Ready" next month. Participating hotels will meet more than 25 criteria and become part of the company's global marketing campaign to attract Chinese travelers via websites and online advertising in China.

"We thought just hotels in the bigger cities would sign up, but we have places like the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs joining because they see the importance to their client base," Mr. Ueberroth said.

Many hotels in the United States and Europe have not adapted. According to a survey by Hotels.com, three-fourths of Chinese travelers say hoteliers need to improve their offering of translated items, like welcome literature, websites, television programs and newspapers, while 42 percent say that they would like to see more Mandarin-speaking staff.

Ray Zhang has made about 10 business trips to the United States from China since 2006, staying at some of the largest hotel chains in the largest cities. "They expect you to know English," he said. More than half of the hotels polled by Hotels.com said they had spent less than \$10,000 in the last 12 months on programs or products for Chinese travelers.

Hotels can go beyond Asian menu items and translation services to cater to Chinese clients with entertainment, among other items. Richard Sprague, co-founder of a Beijing-based health devices company, travels in the United States regularly with Chinese business colleagues, and says he is often asked to find local karaoke rooms (or "KTV," as the Chinese refer to them), which can sometimes be found in Chinese hotels.

Si Jingnan, an engineer from Beijing, said he traveled to the United States once or twice a year and brought a shopping list from relatives or friends. "This list not only contains L.V. or Gucci," Mr. Si said, referring to Louis Vuitton, but it also has new brands he has never heard of in China. A shopping guide or helper from the hotel, even with an extra fee, he said, would be most appreciated.