

In 1974, when Alan Lew travelled from the US to Hong Kong for the first time, China was a no-go zone and he was largely in the dark over what lay north of Hong Kong's border. Had a Temple Street fortune-teller

predicted that, more than three decades later, China would be close to nabbing the title of the world's number one tourist destination, and that he would be co-chairing a Guangzhou (廣州) conference on heritage tourism with Zhongshan University's tourism planning centre, he would scarcely have believed it.

Dr Lew, the American-born son of a Chinese father and a German mother, is a professor in the department of geography, planning and recreation at Northern Arizona University in the US. His speciality is tourism and he's an expert on the industry's development in China.

Dr Lew has become a leading voice among an international field of academic experts conducting research into the three principal themes of the July conference that will focus on the links between heritage and tourism.

"There's physical heritage, which translates primarily as architecture; cultural heritage, which broadly refers to traditional dress, dance, performances and so forth; and natural heritage, which is the physical environment," he said of the forum's key topics.

While heritage tourism offers inherent and practical benefit to the nation and its huge domestic travel market, as well as the big and expanding Asian market, Dr Lew says it has the greatest potential for drawing vast numbers of visitors from North America, Europe and Australia. "China is now the third largest tourist destination in the world after Spain and France. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO] predicts China will surpass Spain to become the most visited country in the world by 2020," said Dr Lew.

Tim Oakes, another US expert watching the China tourism juggernaut, said: "I think it will happen much sooner than that. The director of Asian studies in the department of geography at the University of Colorado, Boulder, has been researching China's tourism development since 1991.

Dr Lew said: "A lot of people from around the world want to travel to China – and China is doing everything possible to promote travel and tourism to support this. China is so big and so diverse – far more so than the United States."

Raising international awareness of just how diverse – and the scope and scale of the country's attributes – was a challenge being addressed, he said. "Western tourists coming to China generally know about a few famous places – the Great Wall, the Imperial Palace, the karst topography at Guilin (桂林), the terracotta soldiers in Xian (西安) and so forth. So this is what they want to see," said Dr Lew.

"But it's what the domestic tourist wants to see as well. The result is that these World Heritage Sites get overcrowded. The question

TOURISM Mainland boom



A young western visitor on his father's shoulders mingles with mainland sightseers in Tiananmen Square. China is the world's third most popular tourist destination, behind France and Spain. Photo: AFP

The throng march

China's nascent tourism industry is ill-prepared to manage the increasing hordes of visitors, writes Wanda Hennig

is, how do you protect these iconic places?" One of the best ways, said Dr Lew, was to steer tourists to lesser-known attractions and to develop new ones.

The coming boom and fears about congestion at the big-name attractions had prompted the UNWTO to start pushing Silk Road tourism through western China and into Central Asia, said Dr Lew.

"Silk Road trips are growing in

popularity with foreigners," said Stanley Toops, a China specialist in the department of geography at Miami University, Florida, who has been researching the tourism landscape of Xinjiang province (新疆自治區) for more than 20 years.

"Tourists from Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan see it as the historic Silk Road of their ancestors, and the path of Buddhism; Europeans see it as part of the exploration phase of the late 1800s Great Game, or Marco Polo; Russians see it as business; Kazakhs and Uzbeks see it as part of the neighbourhood; many visitors from the United States don't have an idea of the place – other than that it's different," said Dr Toops.

The big-picture potential for tourism in China is huge, said Hilary du Cros, a professor at Macau's Institute for Tourism Studies and a keynote speaker at the July conference.

"Now the market is principally mass sightseeing tourism conducted in fairly brief tours," she said. "I'm hoping it will develop and mature to include more Special Interest Tourism segments, where tourists

have a deeper interest in the places they visit or events they attend. The trick is to spread the benefits so that trip itineraries don't just include icon attractions," she said.

Keith Dewar, professor of tourism and hospitality at the University of New Brunswick, Canada, recently completed tourism plans for Harbin (哈爾濱) and Hangzhou (杭州) – as part of larger city plans – in affiliation with the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design, Beijing.

Dr Dewar maintains it has almost become a cliché to say the growth of the country's infrastructure is phenomenal. He refers to huge growth in expanding cities, better roads, faster and more modern trains, a good air passenger service and easier access for international tourists. "People often think of China as having crowded cities and little else. But there are places of great natural beauty, from the tropical forests of Yunnan (雲南省) to the boreal forests of Heilongjiang (黑龍江省)," said Dr Dewar. "Something that puzzles the new Chinese middle class: they want to

show me their modern cities while I want to see their farm villages and smaller towns."

Dr Lew said: "If you have a sense of wonder at what can be done in a short period and the scope of their ideas, China is really amazing."

The first time Dr Lew went to Guilin was in 1992, with his father and two sisters, to visit his father's tiny village, Kaymay. "You can spell it how you want," he said, laughing. "'Kay' means flag and 'may' is the tail of the flag. The furthest and most remote among a small group of villages, the only way to get there was on a motorcycle or bicycle because the road turned into a trail."

More recently, Dr Lew went to the opening of the Guilin bridge project. "I've seen a lot of pretty amazing things in China but that was the most amazing – the old nothing-special bridges replaced by a Golden Gate bridge [San Francisco], an Arc de Triomphe bridge [Paris], and so on. Every city I go to has something new. I'm not saying it's bad. But there are a lot of people who would like to see the old neighbourhoods preserved."

Professor Oakes said: "There's a significant push in China to develop heritage tourism sites. But the focus is less on conservation and more on development."

"Old buildings get rebuilt, built landscapes get 'improved' and 'updated', cultural meanings get reinvented and, in most cases, local governments are primarily

concerned with generating revenues than with preserving heritage as it's typically understood in Europe or North America. The challenge is in convincing potential tourists that 'modernising' and 'heritage' are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that China approaches the whole idea of heritage in a somewhat

China's new middle class want to show me modern cities while I want to see their farm villages and smaller towns

Keith Dewar, professor of Tourism and Hospitality, University of New Brunswick

different way," he said.

Dr Lew was a student in Singapore in 1983 when shops in the city's old Chinatown district were torn down. "That year the number of international visitors dropped for the first time in 20 years. The decline was among North Americans and Europeans. Suddenly, the government got interested in supporting preservation and preservation took off," he said.

"The United States went through the same thing. They used to tear everything down. It wasn't until the 50s and 60s that people got upset

and that kind of thing stopped. I have faith this will happen in China. But will it happen fast enough?"

When Dr Lew first came to Hong Kong in 1974, as a University of Hong Kong exchange student, he knew little about his Chinese heritage. He had dropped out after a year at university in California, feeling it was a waste of time.

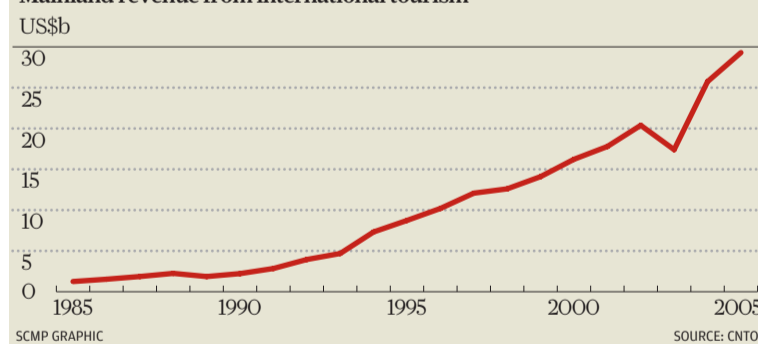
During his first three months in Hong Kong, "I thought it was hell on Earth," he said. "I had never lived anywhere so hot and humid. I never saw a mosquito, but I could hear them and was getting chewed up by them every night." After three months, he says, Hong Kong got to be OK. "After nine months, I didn't want to leave."

One year into his stay, Dr Lew enrolled at the Chinese University and spent 18 months studying Cantonese. Back in California, he studied Putonghua at the University of California, Berkeley. He completed his undergraduate degree in Hawaii, undertook his PhD research on a Fulbright scholarship in Singapore, and got his PhD from the University of Oregon in the US – by which time he'd established himself in the specialist field of tourism geography.

It's this background in tourism research, and his Chinese parentage, that gives him a rare insight into the growing bond between western travellers and the sights the country has to offer increasing numbers of tourists in the years ahead.

Hot money

Mainland revenue from international tourism



Software pieces together Stasi files from shreds of evidence

Kate Connolly

A worker places a handful of paper scraps on a conveyor belt, smoothing the crumpled pieces with the tips of her fingers. Words such as "expedient", "conspiratorial", "relationship" and "telephonist" are visible before they disappear into the scanner. Seconds later, a message is flashing on the computer screen: "Reconstruction completed".

A neighbouring screen displays the "reconstruction" – a typewritten East German secret police report, dated July 1980, about the relationship between a doctor of competitive sport and two of her colleagues, which is deemed by the report's author to go "beyond the normal working relationship". The 10 scraps making up the page have been reassembled for the first time since they were hurriedly torn up 17 years ago.

German scientists have finally received the go-ahead from the government to put their "unshredder" – said to be the world's most sophisticated pattern-

Germany History

recognition machine – into use. After years of debate, €5.8 million (HK\$61 million) has been set aside by the parliament to start piecing together 600 million snippets of paper, or 45 million documents, which were ripped up in a secret operation by panicked Stasi officers after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The officers were ordered by the Stasi boss, Erich Mielke, to destroy the files and stuff them into sacks to be burned. But in what proved to be a comedy of errors, they had to resort to doing it manually after their shredding machines broke down under the weight of the task. Then they were unable to secure the trucks needed to transport the bags to a quarry where they were to be burned, so they abandoned them in the basement of their headquarters in Hohenschonhausen, Berlin.

Until now, the painstaking

reconstruction had been carried out by 30 workers near Nuremberg. Spreading the scraps on large trestle tables and with the use of adhesive tape, tweezers and magnifying glasses, they managed to stick together 350 sackfuls since 1991. But with more than 16,000 brown sacks still to go, it was estimated they would need up to 800 years to complete the task by hand.

Instead, Berlin's Fraunhofer Institute of Production Facilities and Construction Technology has promised its machine can do the same task in five years.

The reason for such expensive scientific effort is that the contents of the sacks could be of immense

In short, it's no longer safe to shred a document; the days of shredding machines are over

Bertram Nickolay, Stasi file project

historical importance, throwing light on the activities of the Stasi's 90,000 agents and 175,000 informants and the 17 million East Germans they spied on.

The machine works by scanning the document fragments into a computer image file. It treats each scrap as if it is part of a huge jigsaw puzzle. The shape, colour, font, texture and thickness of the paper is then analysed so that eventually it's possible to rebuild an electronic image of the original document.

When that has been done, archivists at the BStU, the federal commission for state security files, will file the documents appropriately and decide how and when they're to be made public. Demand will be high. The commission receives 8,000 requests a year to see its files.

The project has not been without its opponents. It is, after all, expected that more than a handful of reputations will be tarnished once the files are made public.

Left-wing MPs, some of whom were once members of the East German communist party, opposed



Jan Schneider of Germany's Fraunhofer Institute demonstrates the pattern-recognition software being used to reconstruct Stasi files in Berlin. Photo: AP

the project on the grounds of cost, hoping that interest in it would go away. It's still not sure that the project's funding is secure for more than a few years.

But Gunter Bormann of the BStU said: "The Stasi officers used their every last strength to destroy these documents in the dead of night. I don't think they're insignificant."

While unable yet to reveal specific details, according to the BStU those sackfuls that have been reconstructed manually have revealed some "highly explosive stuff", on everything from the Stasi's treatment of human rights organisers to its relationship to the

left-wing West German terrorist group the Red Army Faction, and the identities of the Stasi's unofficial spies.

Pressure from historians and Stasi victims' groups helped to keep the interest, as did a recent German feature film, *The Lives of Others*, released in Britain to great acclaim last month, about a Stasi officer who becomes fascinated by the couple he's eavesdropping on. The film is steeped in the gloom and widespread repression of the era.

But even if the government had stalled the project, the commercial potential of the machine would have seen it win through. The Fraunhofer

scientists has received requests to buy the so-called E-Puzzler from authorities in other former communist countries of eastern Europe, such as Latvia and Poland, as well as from Argentina and Chile, which suffered from military dictatorships.

While the scientists waited for the government's approval, the machine was put to a wide range of uses – to help Chinese archaeologists reconstruct smashed terracotta warriors, to solve a multinational tax evasion case, in which copious documents were shredded in an attempt to destroy evidence, and to piece together hundreds of thousands of banknotes shredded by a mother in an attempt to block her estranged daughter from her inheritance.

"In short, it's no longer safe to shred a document; the days of shredding machines are over," said Bertram Nickolay, who has spent 10 years working on the project. "The only safe way to destroy something is by burning it."

The Guardian