

Senior travel booms in China, with Yangtze a popular spot

By Jack Chang
The Associated Press

BEIJING — When Li Caohua retired in her late 50s, the doctor immediately joined millions of other Chinese seniors and hit the road to see more of her giant country.

At the top of her destination list was tropical Hainan island in the south and the ancient villages around her home city of Beijing. Then there was the most grandiose of China's landscapes — the mythic brown waters of the Yangtze River and its mist-enveloped Three Gorges.

Over the decades, Li survived such horrors of 20th-century Chinese history as the manmade famines that killed more than 30 million people in the late 1950s and the political anarchy of the Cultural Revolution that followed. Now, as she and hundreds of other seniors danced, played cards, and chatted in the winding walkways of Beijing's Temple of Heaven, Li said it was her time to play.

"We are fortunate in China that we can travel, and I've seen so much," the 60-year-old woman said. "We're all travelling now to a lot of places."

Travel agencies and packages catering to elderly Chinese say business is booming amid overall growth in the country's travel industry. The number of senior tourists in China jumped by 58 percent last year compared to 2013, according to the state-run *China Daily* newspaper, and 62 percent of Chinese senior citizens join organized tours.

One such tour ended tragically when a river cruiser carrying more than 450 people, mostly elderly tourists, capsized in a heavy storm in the Yangtze. More than 430 people were killed, making the capsizing the deadliest maritime tragedy to hit China since the country's civil war seven decades earlier.

The tour was organized by the Shanghai Xiehe Tourism Agency, with the ship run by the state-owned Chongqing Eastern Shipping Corp., which specializes in Yangtze River travel. The ship, the *Eastern Star*, was plying the river upstream from Nanjing near the eastern coast all the way inland to Chongqing, a



trip of 10 days and about 870 miles.

There are many versions of senior-friendly trips designed for different income groups, with some low-cost options charging 3,000 yuan, or about \$480, for five days on Hainan island, not including airfare, said Beijing travel agent Qi Chun Guan. For Yangtze River travel, most groups fly into the metropolis of Chongqing and then travel downstream to the city of Yichang, Qi said.

"Before, the elderly saved all their money," Qi said. "Now, they want to go out

and see the rest of the world. These people have seen their share of suffering in their lives. Now, with economic development, it's so different from previous generations."

The boom in travel has been one economic bright spot to a graying population that's presenting China with one of its most serious policy challenges.

With U.N. data showing the number of Chinese over age 65 projected to almost double to 210 million people by 2030, the country's retirement system will struggle

VENERABLE VACATIONERS. An elderly man is pushed in a wheelchair at the Temple of Heaven park in Beijing. The number of senior tourists in China jumped by 58 percent last year compared to 2013, according to the state-run *China Daily* newspaper, and 62 percent of Chinese senior citizens join organized tours. Pictured below is an elderly Chinese man gesturing near travel agencies in southwestern China's Chongqing Municipality. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

to keep up, especially as China's one-child policy limits the number of working-age people who can pay for the pensions and meager benefits of their elders, said Yong Cai, an assistant sociology professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

"It's very clear that the next 10 to 15 years down the road will not be so good for the pension system," Yong said. "Xi Jinping has been saying China has to deal with the new economic reality and part of this is a new demographic reality."

For middle-class seniors, however, comes strength in numbers, Qi said. Elderly women known as "dancing grannies" fill the parks of many cities with their music and dance routines. Enormous groups of seniors are also regular sights at Chinese tourist attractions such as Beijing's Forbidden City.

Among the most popular domestic destinations for elderly Chinese are the southeastern coastal province of Fujian and central Sichuan province, where the *Eastern Star* cruise ship was headed when it overturned, Qi said.

He said travel along the Yangtze has fallen since the world's biggest hydroelectric project, the Three Gorges Dam, opened in 2012 and flooded historic sites and scenic canyons.

One 55-year-old property manager, who would only identify himself by his family name of Shu, said he took two-day trips to towns around Beijing with other older Chinese, paying 600 yuan, or about \$100, for each excursion. He recently strolled along the Temple of Heaven's historic covered walkway, protected from the rain and taking in the fresh air, part of what he said was his semi-retired morning routine.

"If you have the money, you go out and play," Shu said. "I've learned to like it."

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