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Which visa is the right visa for me?

A number of people come to China each year and start to work. That's right, they don't apply for a special work visa nor do they attach themselves to a real firm here. They just start up their own little businesses and away they go.

Very illegal and very dangerous if your goal is to stay in China long term.

While the issue of corporate structure is something real to consider if starting your own business, so too is the idea of which visa to secure and why.

There are a myriad of visas that foreigners can apply for in China and it is important that whatever visa you finish up with you choose the right one. The penalties for getting this wrong are rather harsh and the consequences (ie. inability to re-enter the country) can obviously get in the way of doing business in China.

There are five visas you can choose from:

- X – student visa (non-working)
- L – tourist/visitor visa (no work permitted)
- F – non-working business visa
- Z – working visa Residence Permit – permission to reside and work in the country (as of 2005, supercedes Z class)

The classes of visa are quite strict with respect to working and living. For example, F class is good for one year as a maximum. It is possible to extend for a further year but applications must be made with the local government authorities or in the Chinese Embassy/Consulate in your country of origin/another foreign country. It is possible to convert an F class visa to a Z class (working) visa but the fees required for doing so can run as high as US\$7-800 via some agencies. Holders of Z class visas can work/live in China indefinitely, subject to government approval and continuity of employment.