



For Chinese International Students: Stay or Return, That Is the Question

Yingyi Ma and Chongmin Yang

U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken delivered his first major speech on the Biden administration's China policy on May 26, 2022. Unlike the Trump administration, which considered banning all Chinese students from studying in the United States, the Biden administration has shifted from considering Chinese students to be threats to appreciating them as talents, as indicated by the following statement from Blinken's speech: "We're lucky when the best global talent not only studies here but stays here – as more than 80 percent of Chinese students who pursue science and technology PhDs in the United States have done in recent years." But is the high stay rate applicable to all Chinese international students in the United States? The answer is no. In this article, we argue that while America still holds attraction to Chinese students, the appeal is eroding, especially for students in non-STEM fields.

There are no national statistics about the stay or return rates of Chinese international students in the United States, for degrees lower than the doctoral level. The China Statistical Bureau reported that the return rate of Chinese international students increased from 14 percent in 2002 to 82 percent in 2019. In other words, over the past two decades, China's brain drain problem has decreased considerably. This figure is not broken down per host country or degree type. So, what happened to those Chinese students who graduated with degrees lower than PhDs, and other than STEM?

Levels of Education and Fields of Study

Yingyi Ma's book *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education* analyzes the wave of Chinese undergraduates who started enrolling in American colleges and universities around 2006 and who have outnumbered their graduate counterparts since 2014. A chapter examining stay-versus-return intentions notes that around 60 percent of the students surveyed planned to return to China after completing their studies. Also, a major motivation for Chinese students for studying in the United States is to strengthen their credentials, so that they can return to the Chinese labor market with a competitive advantage.

Further, fields of study matter. Chinese students in STEM fields are more likely to stay in the United States than their peers in the humanities and social sciences. International students fill the needs of the fast-growing tech industry in the United States. Also, knowledge and skills in STEM fields are less contingent on social and cultural contexts, which explains the higher return rate of students with non-STEM degrees.

The research and writing of Ma's book were completed before the end of the Trump administration. What has changed since then? What has remained the same?

Abstract

China continues to send the largest number of international students to America. The question is to what extent Chinese students stay in the United States after completing their education. At the micro level, the answer depends on the level of education and field of study. At the macro level, it depends on US immigration policy and the opportunity structure of the Chinese domestic market.

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Pandemic Gloom

The most important change has been brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, which upended international student mobility and, more broadly, transnational mobility. For Chinese students in the United States, the pandemic gloom was exacerbated by worsening US–China relations and the stringent COVID policy restricting international flights to China. Unsurprisingly, the number of Chinese students coming to study in the United States is trending downward. Many are worried about a looming cold war between the United States and China; moreover, rising anti-Asian racism, and, in some instances, gun violence in the United States, have dimmed the appeal of studying there.

With fewer Chinese students in the United States and an increasingly fraught relationship between the two countries, it is reasonable to conclude that the heyday of Chinese students' staying in the United States after completing their studies is past.

Visas and Immigration Policy in the United States

However, potential counterbalancing changes are arising from the Biden administration's immigration policies regarding STEM talent. The US government has expanded the list of STEM fields by making students in 22 additional fields eligible for three-year optional practical training (OPT). Non-STEM OPT is only one year. OPT is not a guarantee for an immigration pathway, but it enables international students to work legally in the United States after completing their studies, potentially lowering their return rate. More importantly, it has given international students additional time to secure an H-1B visa, the type of work visa that allows employers to sponsor a work-related immigration pathway toward permanent residency.

Currently, the expanded list of STEM subjects incorporates many emerging cross-disciplinary fields, such as data analytics and business analytics, which have attracted many international students. This could entice more Chinese students to study science and technology in US graduate schools and stay in the United States as immigrants. Chinese students in the humanities and social sciences do not benefit from this policy change and are expected to return to China in higher numbers.

“Involution” in China

What has remained the same is that the Chinese middle class continues to be dissatisfied with domestic education, which fuels the need to study abroad. A new buzz word, *involution*, which started to circulate on the Chinese internet around late 2020, captures feelings about a combination of social ills and, ultimately, frustration over endless competition in school and work life. The term comes from anthropology and refers to a phenomenon in which greater input does not produce proportionately more output. The concept fits the current Chinese society, where intense competition in education and the economy entails enormous input of effort and money, but fails to generate a comparable output, such as access to good colleges and jobs (See also Qiang Zha, “China’s Academic Profession Hit by ‘Involution,’” in IHE # 107). The “involved” Chinese society spurs those with resources to improve their education and career prospects by obtaining a well-regarded foreign credential. The upshot is that the United States will continue to attract Chinese students because of its colleges and universities, which are the best in the world, but Chinese students are increasingly looking to other countries, such as the United Kingdom, because of increasing geopolitical and other risks of studying in the United States.

In the long term, whether Chinese students with US degrees return to China or stay in the United States depends largely on the opportunity structure of China’s domestic education and labor market and on US immigration policy. Meanwhile, the current hypercompetitive nature of Chinese society does not bode well for homegrown talent, who will continue to seek ways to exit the system and look for opportunities elsewhere. ▲

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