

# Bridging Borders: One Year into the “50,000 Students” Initiative



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In order to build and maintain a stable of China experts who will eventually work in government, the private sector, and academia, it is critical for the US to increase the number of students studying in China today. Language skills and an understanding of cultural nuances, as well as mutual respect and friendship, are best learned through long-term in-country study programs. Several interruptions, including a three-year COVID-zero policy and ongoing bilateral tensions, have resulted

in a steep decline in US students choosing to come to China.

President Xi also recognized the downside of China sequestering itself from the world and, in 2023, announced a five-year initiative to welcome 50,000 US students to China. The goal is to promote people-to-people exchanges, which serve as a vital diplomatic bridge amidst geopolitical tensions. This report aims to evaluate progress one year into the initiative.

While many have focused on the permanent number of US college students studying in China, it appears that the 50,000 target set out by President Xi also includes, for example, US high school students on one or two-week-long exchanges to China. China's Ministry of Education is the primary department overseeing this initiative. Each of the five Chinese diplomatic missions in the US (the Embassy in Washington DC, and the four Consulates in New York, Chicago, San Francisco,

and Los Angeles) has been tasked with bringing 2,000 US students to China each year (for a total of 10,000 per year) for the next five years.

## Progress in the First Year (November 2023 – November 2024)

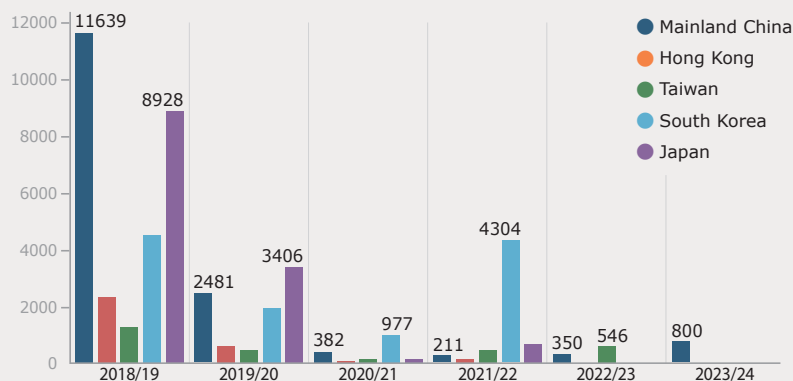
### US Student Enrollment in China

- **Modest Growth:** Following pandemic disruptions, the number

of US students increased slightly from the 2021-22 low of 211 but remains at about 1,000 – far below pre-pandemic levels (2018-2019 peak of 11,600).<sup>1</sup>

- **Short-Term Program Dominance:** There has been a focus on short-term programs (e.g. 1-2 weeks), often subsidized by Chinese government scholarships, but long-term enrollment has yet to fully recover. Precise numbers for these short-term programs have been difficult to find.<sup>2</sup>

### US University Students Abroad in East Asia



	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<b>Mainland China</b>	11639	2481	382	211	350	800
<b>Hong Kong</b>	2314	543	32	120	-	-
<b>Taiwan</b>	1270	451	100	468	546	-
<b>South Korea</b>	4558	1942	977	4304	-	-
<b>Japan</b>	8928	3406	124	678	-	-

\*\* Opendoorsdata.org has not published figures for 2022-23 or 2023-24, subsequent data for mainland China and Taiwan is pulled from other government reports

In the 2018-2019 academic year, there were 369,548 US students abroad, of whom 28,864 were studying within East Asia [mainland China: 11,639, Japan: 8,928, South Korea: 4,558, Hong Kong: 2,314, and Taiwan: 1,270].

However, due to the pandemic, by 2019-2020, the number of US students in mainland China had plummeted to 2,481, Hong Kong to 543, and Taiwan to 451. By 2020-2021, this dropped further to 382 for Mainland China, 32 for Hong Kong, and 100 for Taiwan, with similarly low numbers continuing in 2021-2022.

Conversely, Japan and South Korea became more appealing destinations for US students. Despite the overall decline, Japan's numbers rose from 124 in 2020-2021 to 678 in 2021-2022, and South Korea saw an increase from 977 to 4,304 in the same period.<sup>3</sup>

Last year, US Ambassador Burns stated at the 2024 AmCham China Appreciation Dinner that in the 2022-2023 academic year, the number of US students in mainland China had risen to 350. For the 2023-2024 academic year, that figure had more than doubled to an estimated 800 American students actively enrolled in China.

### Key Findings:

- *Slow recovery in US student enrollment in China.*
- *Enhanced visa accessibility and processing tempered by procedural hurdles.*
- *Expanded flight routes, but still below pre-pandemic levels, with ongoing travel cost issues.*
- *Significant geopolitical and public perception challenges.*

### Recommendations:

- *Prioritize longer-term partnerships with US institutions.*
- *Reduce travel costs and enhance student safety assurances.*
- *Strengthen promotional efforts for US-China exchanges.*

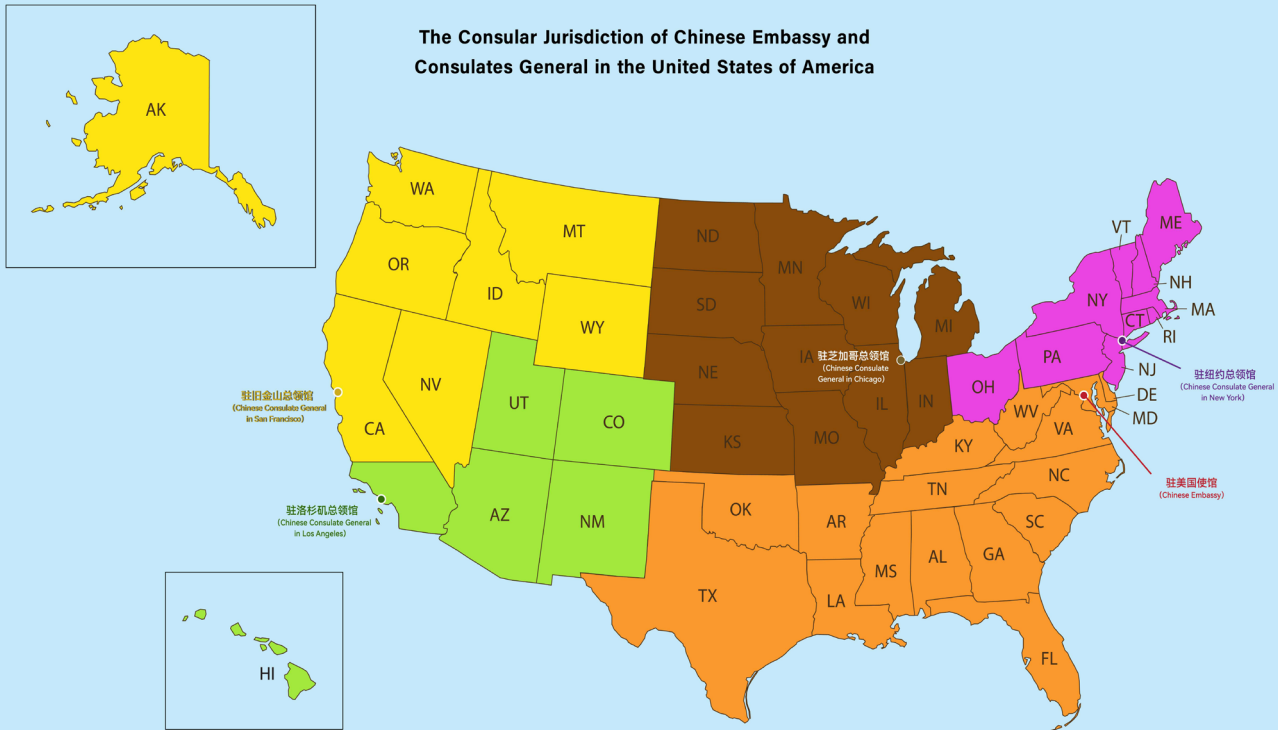
<sup>1</sup> <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/all-destinations/>

<sup>2</sup> AmCham China is currently trying to ascertain exactly how many US students (including high school students) have traveled to China as part of the 50,000 initiative.

<sup>3</sup> <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/all-destinations/>

## 中国驻美国使领馆领区划分图

The Consular Jurisdiction of Chinese Embassy and Consulates General in the United States of America



\*\* This map displays the jurisdiction of the Chinese Embassy and its four Consulates in the US, dividing the country into administrative regions assigned to specific consular offices. Recent changes in jurisdiction areas reflect factors such as the closure of the Houston Consulate in 2020 and regional demand for visas, impacting consular staffing needs.

Source: Chinese Embassy in the US

### Visa Issuance and Policies

- **Improved Visa Accessibility:** The Chinese government has expedited visa processing, reduced wait times, and eased bureaucratic obstacles, particularly for short-term exchanges.
- **Visa Data:** While complete 2024 data is pending, initial indicators show increased visa issuance for US students.

### Visas for China

The process for obtaining a visa for China has improved compared to the immediate aftermath of the pandemic. However, the process for securing an X1 or X2 visa (for long-term and short-term students, respectively) remains complex. Students must complete an extensive documentation process and attend in-person consulate visits, which may still deter them from coming to China. As a result, many students are shifting their preference toward more accessible countries.

With the 2020 closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston, the visa application process for US students has become more complicated due to further travel distances and longer processing times compared to pre-pandemic times, with the DC Embassy now responsible for handling students from more than 20 states. For X1/X2 visa applications, students must appear in person at their regional Chinese consulate for processing, with each state assigned to one of the following five locations: the Embassy in Washington, DC; Consulates in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago. This can involve journeys thousands of miles long to obtain a visa before travel, and individuals who appear at the incorrect location will be turned away.

### Student Challenges: Case Studies<sup>4</sup>

Despite improvements in visa accessibility and modest increases in enrollment, US students seeking to study in mainland China continue to

face substantial logistical and financial challenges, particularly regarding visa procurement. The following case studies highlight the hardships encountered by current US students in the application and visa process.

#### Case 1: Dual Citizenship and Enrollment Challenges

Holly from Oregon, who holds passports from both the US and Hong Kong, faced an unexpected situation at a university in Beijing after her classes had begun. Due to the requirement of Chinese institutions to list separate application categories for mainland Chinese, international, and Hong Kong/Macau/Taiwan students, Holly was presented with two options: either relinquish her Hong Kong right of abode

<sup>4</sup> The names in these case studies have been changed to protect identities.



to remain enrolled or reapply using her Hong Kong documents, which would mean forfeiting her current acceptance and reapplying the following year. Ultimately, she relinquished her Hong Kong right of abode in order to stay in her program.

**Case 2: Costly Consulate Requirements**

Jackson, from Colorado, was directed to the Chinese consulate in Chicago for his visa application. With limited options for affordable flights, the only available last-minute round-trip ticket was priced at \$600. Faced with the additional costs of an extended hotel stay in Chicago for the required four-day processing period, Jackson used a private courier service to retrieve his passport from the Consulate in person and mail it back to Colorado via the US postal service. With his departure date approaching, he was left to rely on the mail system to ensure the timely return of his passport, adding stress and financial strain to an already complicated process.

**Case 3: Conflicting Consulate Information and Last-Minute Travel**

Alyssa, from Florida, faced unexpected challenges when securing her visa, which resulted in costly additional travel to another city. Her appointment could not be scheduled until receiving the necessary Chinese government-approved education forms, which arrived only two weeks before her departure. Following advice from an outdated webpage on the website of the Chinese consulate, she believed Floridian residents were processed in New York. After making last-minute travel and hotel arrangements to New York, she was informed on arrival

at the New York consulate that her correct processing location was now in Washington, DC – not New York, as had previously been the case. This misunderstanding forced her to make additional urgent travel and accommodation arrangements to complete the visa process on time, significantly increasing both her costs and time spent handling administrative duties.

**Flight Availability and Travel Logistics**

● **Improved Routes:** The number of direct flights between the US and China has increased since the pandemic, simplifying travel logistics for exchange participants. As of April 2024, there are 162 non-stop flights US-China flights each week. However, despite this improvement, none of these flights are operated by US carriers from eastern or midwestern cities such as New York, Washington DC, Chicago, Dallas, or Atlanta – important hubs in the pre-pandemic US-China travel network.<sup>5</sup>

● **New Normal:** Despite some recovery, the current number of weekly US-China flights remains far below pre-COVID levels. Recent data shows that total flights between China and the US are operating at only 21.33% of 2019 levels, well below the broader recovery rate for international flights in both countries. Within this total, direct flights operated specifically by US carriers are estimated to be under 15% of pre-COVID volumes. Despite some recovery, the overall number of weekly flights between the US and China remains significantly below pre-pandemic levels, and it is unlikely these routes will return to previous volumes soon due to complex political and economic factors.<sup>6</sup>

● **Travel Costs:** The limited number of routes and increased operational costs, such as the need for US airlines to avoid Russian airspace, continue to drive up travel costs. This remains a substantial challenge, particularly for longer-term exchange programs,

**Studying in China: Costs of Getting There**

(Below costs are estimates and do not include tuition or room/board)

<b>University Application Fee:</b>	\$110
<b>X1/X2 Visa Application Fee:</b>	\$170 (Presence required at Embassy/Consulate assigned to location of student's residence.  Associated travel costs (transport, hotel, courier etc.): \$80-\$1,000)
<b>Health Exam:</b>	\$70
<b>One-way travel US to China:</b>	\$700-\$1,800
<b>Residence Permit:</b>	\$110
<b>Health Insurance:</b>	\$110
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$1,350-\$3,370</b>

<sup>5</sup> “中国驻美使馆发布赴华签证最新要求,” Carnoc.com, October 20, 2023, <https://news.carnoc.com/list/620/620267.html>.

<sup>6</sup> “中国驻美使馆发布赴华签证最新要求,” Carnoc.com, October 20, 2023, <https://news.carnoc.com/list/620/620267.html>.

where the higher costs add an additional barrier to participation.

### Chinese-Language Programs

- **Government Programs:** State Department-funded language programs in China have yet to return after being suspended during the pandemic. A resumption is unlikely while a Level 3 State Department travel advisory to China remains in place.<sup>7</sup>
- **Institute Closures:** The near-total closure of Confucius Institutes in the US due to concerns over their influence and propaganda (from over 100 in 2019 to fewer than five by 2024) has also meant a once-popular language option for students studying Chinese in the US is no longer available.
- **Rebranded Programs:** US universities are creating alternative language programs, often partnering with Taiwanese or private entities. These programs are smaller in scale and focus on short-term study.
- **Reduced Opportunities:** With fewer language courses and the localization of many MNCs, many existing students are limited in finding internships or full-time employment in China either during or after their studies, further narrowing the pipeline of US professionals in China.

## Challenges and Barriers to Studying and Working in China

### Geopolitical Tensions

- **Bilateral Tensions:** Ongoing US-China issues – especially concerning Taiwan, security, and trade disputes – impact student exchange participation. Many US universities remain cautious about deepening ties with Chinese institutions.
- **Changing Priorities:** The many positives of living and working in China as a foreigner have been overshadowed – especially since the pandemic – by the rising number of challenges facing

expats, including visa scrutiny, growing wariness of foreigners, and more.

### Public Perception in the US

- **CCP Reputation:** Concerns about academic freedom and Chinese government motives have contributed to skepticism among US families and educational institutions about sending students to the China for fear they would be participating in programs that are primarily part of CCP (Chinese Communist Party) propaganda rather than programs that are focused on language or Chinese culture.
- **Perception of Bias:** Several of the program's most prominent supporters are organizations that oversee the building of China's image rather than educational institutions. This opens the programs up to criticism outside China.
- **Career Prospects:** When weighing up their international options, US students are increasingly concerned that a stint in China could be seen in years to come as a black mark on their career rather than as a positive experience.
- **Security Clearance:** Anecdotal evidence suggests several China-based professionals have struggled to obtain security clearances for US government positions for no apparent reason, despite a stated need for more China expertise back home.
- **Pandemic Hangover:** Despite relaxed travel restrictions, health concerns and logistical uncertainties related to COVID-19 have slowed the rebound in student exchanges and discouraged foreign nationals from applying to China-based positions.

### Administrative Issues for Employment

- **Work Sponsorship Hurdles:** Rising geopolitical tensions, job competition, and tighter visa rules have made it harder for Americans to secure work sponsorship in China.
- **Workplace Challenges:** Geopolitical tensions have resulted in heightened scrutiny of foreign workers in China. Anecdotal evidence suggests that

recent applicants have reported experiencing additional hurdles for Americans seeking employment in China, including more rigorous background checks and a more protracted employment visa approval process

- **Evolving Employment Standards:** Regulatory changes in the past have tightened employment requirements, with applicants often needing higher qualifications and more relevant work experience than before, making students less likely to stay in China after graduating. More recent rules have attempted to relax these requirements, but they were aimed at a small group of companies in a specific set of districts, meaning that few people qualify.
- **Talent Classification System:** China's focus on "high-end talent" in 2017, in which a three-tiered system graded all foreign workers as either A, B, or C, aimed to reduce the number of foreigners without graduate degrees from building careers in the country.<sup>8</sup>

## AmCham China Recommendations

### Expand high-impact partnerships at the university level

- **For Chinese government:** Focus on undergraduate and graduate study programs that support the long-term stable outlook for US-China relations, expanding the models currently run by the Yenching and Schwarzman academies.
- **For US government:** Increase collaboration between US and Chinese universities, especially in regions of the US where Chinese-language programs have closed.

<sup>7</sup> <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/china-travel-advisory.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-work-permits-are-you-a-b-c-tier-talent/>

### Encourage participation from both countries

- **For both governments:** Aim to increase the number of two-way student visits. Incentivize US universities to engage in exchange programs and support institutional partnerships with Chinese universities.
- **For Chinese government:** Address academic freedom and personal safety concerns by offering greater institutional transparency and safety guarantees for US students visiting China.

### Widen career options for US graduates to work in China

- **For Chinese government:** Loosen employment requirements in China for new graduates interested in staying in the country.
- **For US government:** Push for assurances that time spent in China won't count

against prospects in government and government-adjacent career paths.

- **For AmCham China member companies:** Promote career opportunities among US student population in China via AmCham China.

### Remove existing administrative and logistical hurdles

- **For Chinese government:** Provide streamlined visa services to US students interested in studying in China, with fast-track visa options and reduced in-person requirements.
- **For US government:** Work with airlines to subsidize flights for student travelers.

## Conclusion

The first year of this initiative has shown promising signs of progress in terms of visa facilitation and expanded travel routes.

However, much work remains to address geopolitical tensions, public perception, and high travel costs. China appears to have been strategic about achieving its targeted numbers by having different consulates assigned to finding students and looking to both universities and high schools as well as short- and long-term programs, all being ways to achieve the goal of bringing 50,000 US students to China.

The following year will be critical in scaling the initiative through enhanced partnerships and greater institutional collaboration. In particular, while AmCham China recognizes that any US students coming to China for any length of time is better than nothing, the Chamber would still like to see an emphasis placed on longer-term exchanges at the university level, paving the way for US graduates to consider a career working in, or with respect to, China.

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