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for Business and Government

## **Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions**

**Richard Yarrow**  
**Harvard Kennedy School**

**Victoria Li**  
**Harvard University**

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# **Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions**

Richard Yarrow and Victoria Li

HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

About 300,000 students from the People’s Republic of China study in the United States. Since 2015, American universities have hosted more students from China than from any other country. This population of students lay the base for academic ties between the U.S. and China. Today, university relations are near the heart of U.S.-China relations—encapsulating issues of intellectual property, national security, cultural exchange, and scientific and economic progress.

These issues are magnified for the subset of Chinese citizen students who pursue graduate degrees in STEM fields. Such students are alternately desired for their talents and politically mistrusted, and find themselves increasingly watched, by authorities on both sides of the Pacific.

On one hand, American universities must be cautious about improper information transfers involving Chinese students and which might harm the position of the United States in an increasingly tense “tech race.” On the other hand, American universities rightly fear that political pressures on Chinese students will alienate talent from a large country that could bring scientific and economic stimulus to the U.S. Historically, Chinese scientists who immigrated to the U.S. have contributed to a growing number of great scientific breakthroughs, from Jiangsu-born Chien-Shiung Wu’s under-appreciated contributions to the Manhattan Project and particle physics, to Hebei-born Feng Zhang’s work in the development of CRISPR. On top of the contributions of specific individuals, if spending by international students is counted in terms of trade, then higher education has become one of the U.S.’s largest exports and one of its most vibrant industries.<sup>1</sup>

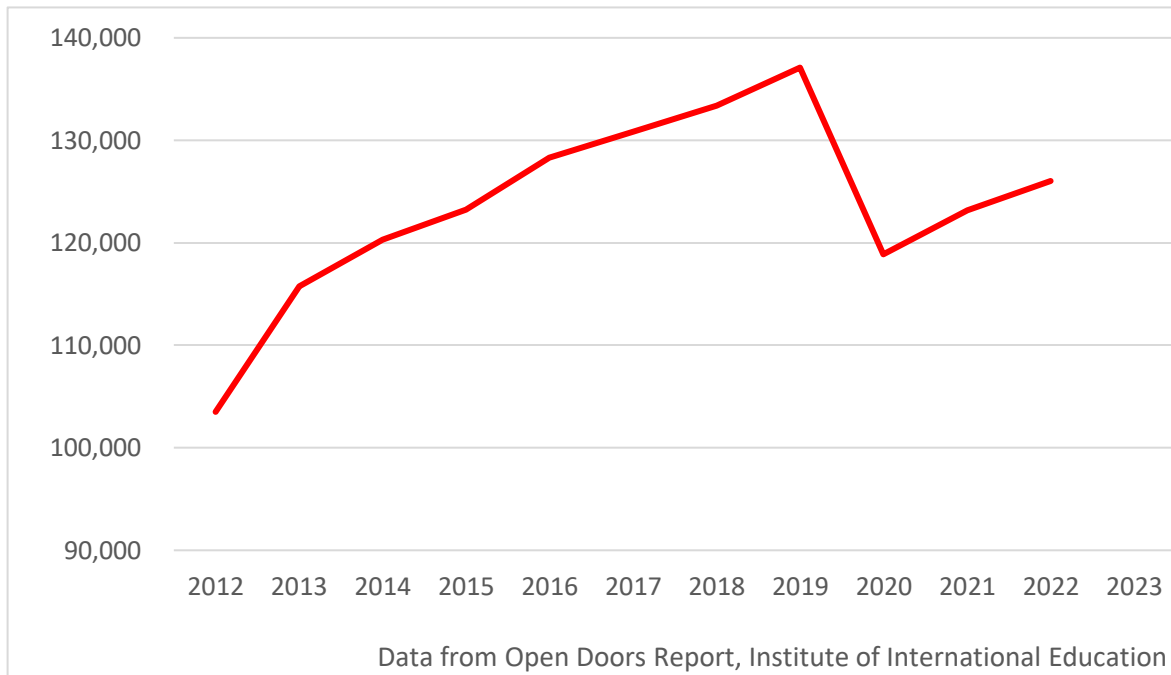
Many recent efforts of U.S. policymakers and academic administrators have focused on reducing trade and security risks related to Chinese students. Such policies, whether justifiable or not, tend to deter or increase difficulties for Chinese students studying in the U.S. Beyond these “negative” measures, what can be done to encourage Chinese students to come to the U.S., help them live well and improve their research, and strengthen the benefits that Chinese students bring to the U.S. and its universities? This question becomes more salient as

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Bauman, “How the pandemic hammered a key U.S. export: Education,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-the-pandemic-hammered-a-key-u-s-export-education>.

reported numbers of Chinese students in the U.S. have moderately declined since a peak of over 370,000 in 2019-2020.<sup>2</sup>

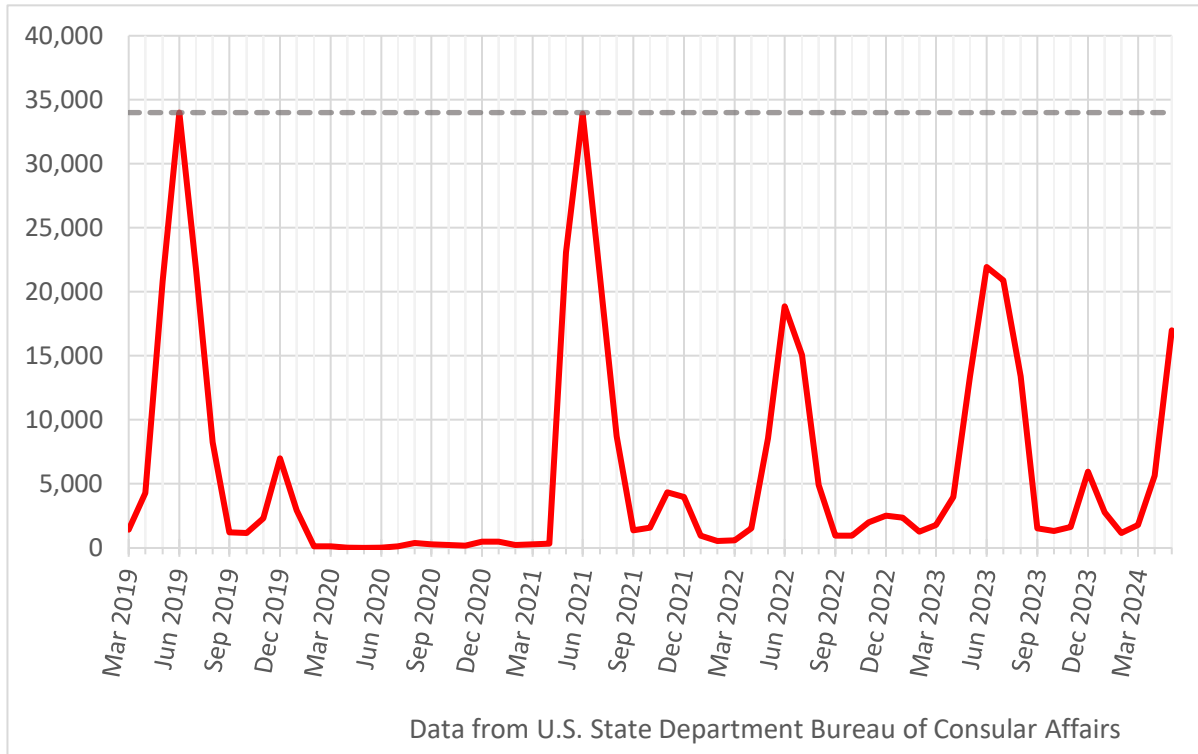
*Figure 1*  
**Estimated Fall Enrollment of Graduate Students from China  
2012 - 2023**



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<sup>2</sup> “International Students,” Open Doors Report data, updated Nov. 12, 2023, Institute of International Education, <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/>.

*Figure 2*  
**Issuances of F-1 Student Visas for PRC Citizens by Month**  
**March 2019 – March 2024**



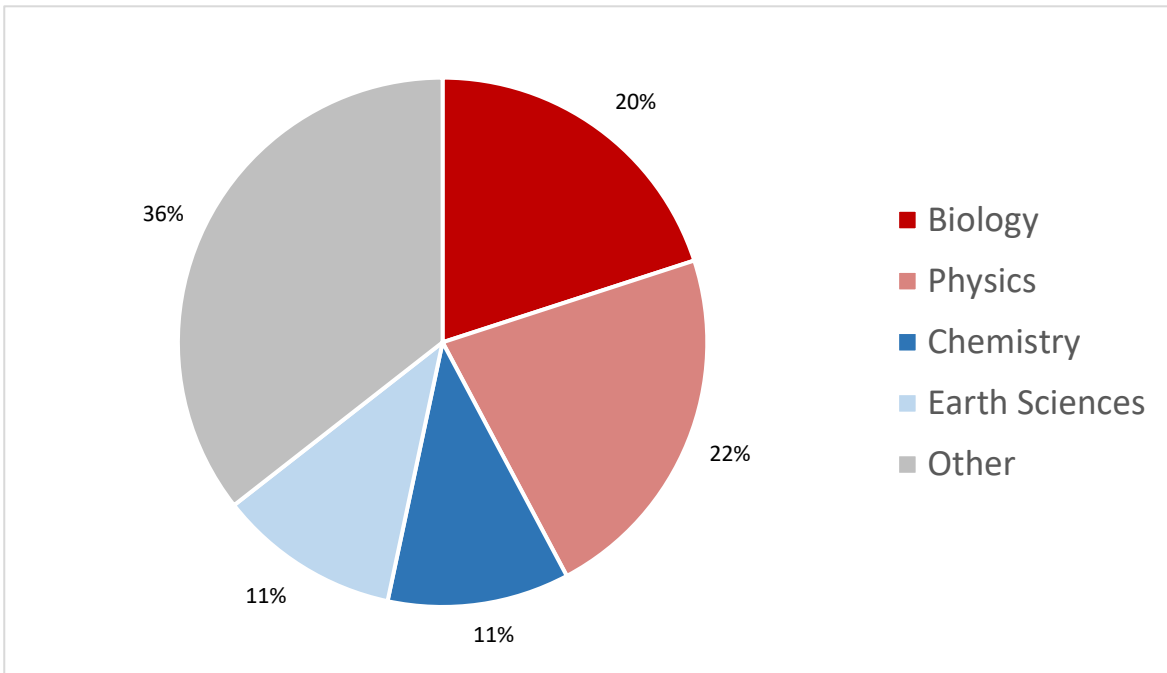
Few have asked Chinese students themselves about what they want or worry about.<sup>3</sup> At a time when many Chinese STEM graduate students are under great stress—from job markets, geopolitics, and lingering effects of the pandemic—we sought to shine light on how Chinese graduate students, primarily in STEM fields, think about their time in American higher education. Over the last three years, we conducted multi-hour interviews with roughly 45 Chinese doctoral or postdoctoral students currently at universities across the United States. The students we spoke with came from regions across mainland China, belong to many different

<sup>3</sup> The studies that have done so include several by David Zweig, and a German-focused study by Mao Yishu. See for instance, Mao Yishu, “Conflicted minds and hearts: A survey of the political attitudes of Chinese students in Germany,” MERICS, March 26, 2020, <http://merics.org/en/report/conflicted-hearts-and-minds>. Other studies have focused on older demographics, with respondent interests and findings that differ from what we have found. For instance, see Yu Xie, Xihong Lin, Ju Li, and Junming Huang, “Caught in the crossfire: Fears of Chinese-American scientists,” *PNAS* 120, no. 27 (July 4, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2216248120>.

disciplines, and have experience with U.S. institutions ranging from large public research universities to small religiously-affiliated campuses.

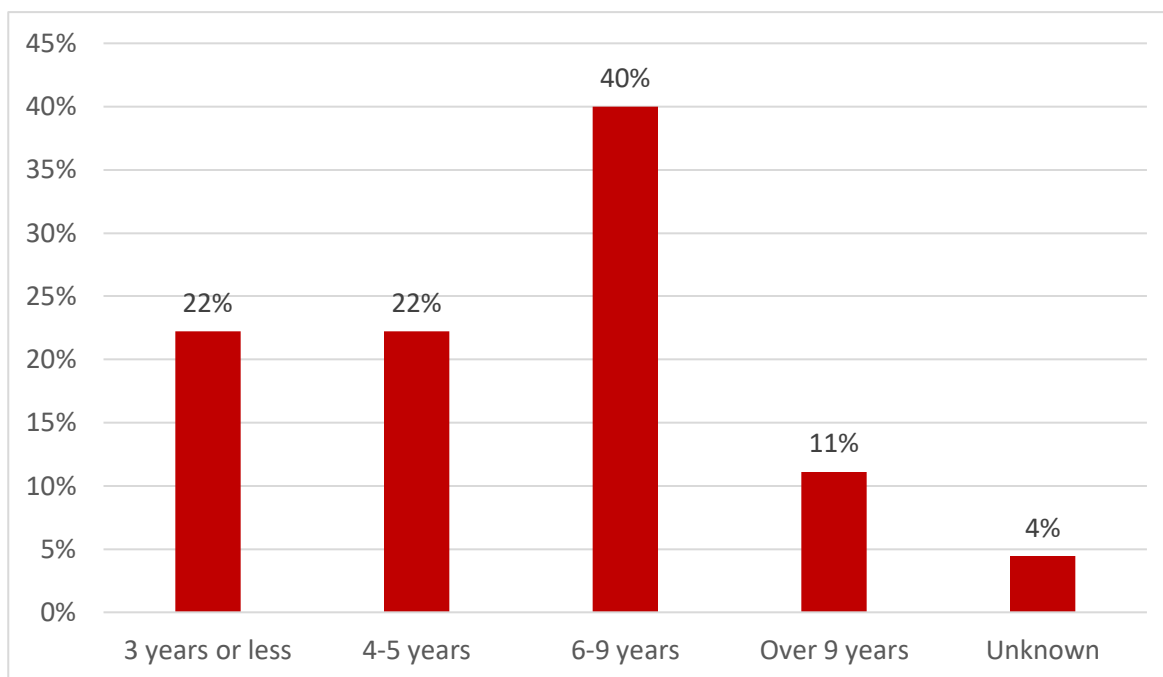
What do these students think and worry about? How can American universities better serve and attract Chinese talent? Given a population of hundreds of thousands of Chinese students studying in the U.S., there is no single answer to this question. We offer an outline based on comments from our sample. In doing so, we hope to suggest approaches that U.S. universities and policymakers can take to improve these students' research, education, and living conditions; improve social or cultural bonds between the U.S. and China through these students; and convince more of them to remain in the United States after graduating. Whether or not one agrees with our interviewees' interpretations, it is important for American universities to understand what their views are in order to enhance their studies and U.S. institutions' strengths with respect to students from overseas.

*Figure 3*  
**Interviewees by Field of Study**



*Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education  
Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions*

*Figure 4*  
**Interviewees' Duration of Time in the U.S.**



## **Navigating Policies**

The first trouble for most Chinese students begins before they arrive in the United States. Almost every student we met expressed concern about obtaining and keeping a visa. Many students we spoke with see current visa policies as unfairly targeting people from China compared with students from other countries.

As one student said, “we have to wait one month for a one-year visa. For other countries it takes three days and they get a five-year visa,” even though, he added, “we’re just here to do research and we’re not representatives of the Chinese government.” Many students said they were frightened about visa interviews and worried that if they make a mistake in applying for a visa, their chance of studying in the U.S. might be ruined forever. Some students told us that they avoided applying for U.S. tourist visas earlier in their lives, out of fear that, if they

*Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education  
Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions*

are denied a tourist visa, they also would lose their chance of gaining a student visa.<sup>4</sup>

Short visa durations—which primarily apply to students in STEM fields—and the difficulty of obtaining new visas make Chinese students anxious about whether they can visit friends in China, search for jobs abroad, or attend scientific conferences even in countries allied with the U.S., like France or Japan. Students’ most pressing concern, however, was that they would not be able to see their parents or grandparents in China without risking their ability to return to the U.S. to continue their education. Before summer of 2023, due to the pandemic, visa policies, and limited and expensive flights between the U.S. and China, many students had gone three years or more without seeing parents or other relatives, a circumstance that many students were not used to and intensely disliked.

Repeated Covid-19 lockdowns in China amplified the sense of uncertainty created by U.S. visa policies. Many students worried whether they could see their parents in the event of a future emergency, and if such travel would mean they must completely sacrifice studies or careers in the U.S. One student told us that visa policies were the most important reason why she reconsidered staying in the U.S.: When she started graduate school, she thought about trying to work in the U.S., but the unpredictability and restrictions of her U.S. visa made her think that “it’s not secure” and “too risky” to plan to stay in case she needed to return to China to care for her parents.

The FBI’s “China Initiative” dominated much of the U.S. media discourse around U.S.-China academic ties, but for most of the students we spoke with, this initiative was an afterthought. Of the students who mentioned the initiative, most had concluded, even while the initiative was ongoing, that it would not personally affect them. That did not mean our interviewees were comfortable about trends in federal policies. Aside from visa concerns, many students expressed concerns

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<sup>4</sup> In January 2024, Chinese state-owned media reported stories of unnamed Chinese students who were denied entry at U.S. airports, including a student with the pseudonym “Meng Fei” who allegedly was pursuing a PhD in biology at Yale University. While these specific stories are hard or impossible to verify, they relate closely to anxieties about visas that we heard in our interviews over earlier years. The recent Chinese media reports likely heighten the sense of uncertainty that many Chinese students feel regarding their U.S. visas. For an English account, see Jiawen Zhang and Zichen Wang, “How U.S. Customs shattered Chinese female PhD students’ American Dream,” *Pekingnology*, Jan. 5, 2024, <https://www.pekingnology.com/p/how-us-customs-shattered-chinese>.



about growing numbers of grants or programs for early-career scientists that were becoming closed for non-U.S. citizens or closed specifically for Chinese citizens. Others described finding that they were suddenly unable to attend conferences outside of the U.S., due to their citizenship and visa restrictions. These limitations, sometimes appearing in the middle of students' graduate programs, greatly frustrated many STEM students.

Many Chinese students also have trouble navigating more mundane logistics of life in the U.S. Even many PhD students in well-endowed Ivy League universities told us that they had little idea about how to receive healthcare in the U.S. Several students told us that they know US healthcare is very expensive and very hard to get; they think, but are not sure, that their universities provide some degree of health coverage, but assumed that most healthcare would be far beyond their finances and that they would have to visit a hospital for most health needs. Some students defer health needs until they have a chance to visit China again, assuming that U.S.-based healthcare would be unaffordable for them and ignorant about what their insurance plans might provide. High-quality preventive care, regular medical check-ups, and specialist care outside of hospitals are still fairly uncommon in much of China outside of major cities. Many younger Chinese students in the U.S. are unaware of features of U.S. healthcare, and apparently do not know that many services may be covered by their insurance or university health plans.

Some of these difficulties are unavoidable, and visa and travel difficulties may persist for a long time. Still, universities could urge the federal government to create easier visa procedures for academic conference travel among U.S. allies, such as in Europe or Canada, even if a student is in the process of converting or renewing a visa. More universities can actively clarify visa policies for Chinese students so that students can have a better sense of what to expect. Likewise, universities can better orient Chinese and other foreign students about health programs available to them. Even by simply informing students that they do not need to visit a hospital to see a doctor, universities can clarify common misconceptions about how to obtain healthcare.

# Navigating Politics

Political tensions between the U.S. and China create ideological and social challenges for Chinese students. In that context, are there opportunities for greater dialogue between Chinese and American students that can help people from each country better understand or navigate political differences?

Many of the students we spoke with were uncomfortable about the idea of talking about China or international relations with American students. Most did not want to say anything that might offend their American peers, but a large number of Chinese students also considered their American classmates “brainwashed” (a term that came up many times, independently) about China. They typically did not blame their American peers for Americans’ views of China, and explained the situation as a predictable result of American media, similar (they told us) to the “brainwashing” that people in China receive about the United States from China’s media.

Of the more explicitly liberal or reform-minded Chinese students, many were afraid of talking about China even while in the U.S., out of fear that their comments could be reported and create controversy for themselves back in China. Such students represented a minority of the students we met.

On the other hand, many students we spoke with expressed frustration at increasingly “anti-China” atmospheres at their universities. In their accounts, geopolitics usually was not introduced by professors, but by invited speakers, activist student groups, or other international students. For instance, some Chinese students organized a petition to their university to protest then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo speaking at their school (according to the students, their U.S. university did not respond to the petition). Others complained to us about how a group of non-Chinese international students at their U.S. university created a project calling Covid-19 the “Chinese virus” several months after the pandemic began.

In many U.S. universities, conversations related to China have broken down or are simply not taking place between Chinese and American students or among Chinese students themselves. This is not necessarily bad: after all, discussions of

*Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education  
Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions*

politics or international relations generally do not help cohesion or collegiality within a STEM laboratory. Still, enhancing dialogue between Chinese and American students could be a good opportunity for mutual understanding. Universities may also be concerned if many Chinese students feel that they are unable to speak freely.

U.S. universities should be concerned that Chinese students of diverse political persuasions—including those who like and those who dislike China’s government—often do not feel able to freely express their views on U.S. campuses. Universities could create initiatives or structured dialogues for students from China and the U.S. to discuss events in their respective countries with one another. For students who generally support the Chinese government’s goals and policies, Americans should seek to understand and engage their perspectives, and universities should be careful to ensure that these students feel they have opportunities on campus to safely share their views. For Chinese students who wish to express criticism and fear monitoring, U.S. universities and government agencies should similarly strive to ensure their comfort and safety, while encouraging these students to mix with diverse peer groups that include students from the U.S. and many other countries.

## **Safety and Vulnerabilities**

Many students expressed a growing fear for their safety in the U.S., alarmed by reports of crime and gun ownership. In June 2017, a Chinese student was kidnapped and murdered near the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In November 2021, a Chinese graduate student at the University of Chicago was shot to death while sitting in his stopped car in a parking lot. In August 2023, a Chinese graduate student was charged with shooting and killing his Hubei-born professor, Zijie Yan, at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. These tragedies received significantly more attention in China than they did in the United States.

As a result, some Chinese students in the U.S. have wondered if the U.S. government and universities genuinely care about the safety of people from China. Other students—particularly those on urban campuses—suggested to us that, while Chinese people might not face a greater risk of violence than others in

*Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education  
Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions*

the U.S., the U.S. itself is becoming more dangerous, and their universities are not doing enough to ensure the basic safety of all students. If U.S. universities want to continue attracting students from China, they must strive to emphasize and prove that they take the safety of international students seriously. For example, one Chinese student told us of “checking my rear-view mirror every time I stop in case someone is coming for me.” Universities and policymakers should clearly prove to international students that this is an irrational fear.

Professors hold enormous power over the lives of graduate students, as they can determine the fate of students’ publications, research funding, dissertation defenses, post-graduate hiring, and—vital for international students—visa status. Although most students spoke favorably to us of their labs and professors, Chinese students may be especially vulnerable to abuses because they lack familiarity with U.S. labor laws and university policies, and lack experience defending themselves against a professor, institution, or higher-rank official. Moreover, many are insecure about their English language abilities, and therefore less likely to try to protest or defend themselves against unfair treatment.

In our interviews, we heard multiple stories of professors at U.S. universities who took advantage of or abused their Chinese citizen graduate students. One student described in great detail the abusive conditions in the laboratory of a professor (who was also a Chinese citizen) at a major U.S. research university. In the interviewee’s telling, this professor regularly threatened to suspend students’ graduation dates and visas if they did not perform menial tasks, including in the middle of the night, and regularly withheld promised wages for his student lab workers. This professor avoided repercussions in part by almost exclusively hiring Chinese international students to his laboratory. The students did not defend themselves and assumed they had no recourse, and their U.S. university was evidently not aware or did not investigate.

While this situation is hopefully exceptional, several other students referred to the intense workload of some U.S. laboratories that have Chinese principal investigators and mostly or entirely Chinese graduate students. Other students who were not victims themselves told us they had heard “many similar cases” of abuses of Chinese graduate students at U.S. universities, typically in laboratories that have no or almost no students from North America or Europe.

*Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education  
Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions*

Many students we spoke with laughed at the idea of defending themselves against an abusive senior professor in China, where academic culture is “more hierarchical” and there are fewer institutional safeguards for students. It is not surprising that these students would feel uncomfortable reporting or protesting problems with professors at U.S. universities. Even if students want to report a problem with a professor, most do not know how to, and feel they are at a greater disadvantage given limited familiarity with American culture. U.S. universities should be concerned not only about the possibility of students’ and professors’ improper ties with Chinese government agencies but also about ensuring fair and ethical treatment for their own Chinese graduate students, in line with American labor laws and common standards for higher education.

## **Social Adjustments to American Schools**

How well do Chinese students enjoy their U.S. campuses or fit into American social environments? The majority of the students we spoke with told us that they almost exclusively socialized with other Chinese students. American student activities do not make sense or are not relatable to many Chinese students, in our interviewees’ accounts to us.

As one biochemistry student told us, “I do not understand what is so fun about standing and holding a beer” at a party with lab colleagues, a sentiment echoed by many others. Another student said, “overseas Chinese... will be more isolated than if [they] study in China.” As the same student continued, “I don’t get involved with community outside the biology bubble... I have many friends in China and am making a few friends in the U.S.—that’s enough for me.” Another Chinese graduate student compared herself with friends who stayed in China: “I feel their experience was much more interesting! They had a lot more spare time, do more with classmates. There are more people in dorms, so it’s more exciting—I’m really jealous about that. I didn’t join any club in undergrad—never had that fun experience because I couldn’t talk about much with [American] locals.” The main exceptions—the students who said they socialized more with Americans—tended to be students who attended high school partly in the United States or who

*Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education  
Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions*

belonged to religious groups on their campuses.

The separated social circumstances of Chinese students seem most related to three factors—two challenges and one advantage. The core challenges are language and cultural barriers. Although English is widely studied in China’s best high schools, many Chinese students do not feel comfortable speaking English in day-to-day conversations. Some students told us that they only feel able to speak English fluently in “scientific” settings, involving the regular tasks, observations, or equipment in their labs. Others said they fear “losing face” if they make mistakes with English grammar, and therefore try to speak English as little as possible while on campus. One student told us that although her classes in China trained her extensively in English grammar, in her first weeks of classes in the U.S. she stayed awake all night for many nights trying to memorize the meanings of all the words that her professor used in a class. English was our interviewees’ greatest obstacle and the first stressor that came to mind out of all of their experiences within U.S. universities.

Culturally, most students told us that they feel unable to relate to American jokes or are confused by references to American television and popular culture. By contrast, many Chinese students thought that Korean, Indian, and European students were much better able to handle these cultural references, which could be related to China’s tightening restrictions on access to Western media.

An advantage which limits many Chinese students’ interactions with Americans is the existing well-developed network of Chinese students at many larger U.S. universities. When new Chinese students arrive on campus, they can often find a WeChat group containing all the students from China at their university, or more specific WeChat groups for students from particular hometowns, provinces, undergraduate universities in China, or academic departments. WeChat groups then reinforce social ties fostered through more formal student organizations like Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) branches. These groups immediately provide students with a community to meet their social needs, reducing students’ motivations to go out of their way to make non-Chinese friends.

What would clearly help Chinese students integrate into campus social life is better language programs on their campuses. Many students are already basically

*Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education  
Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions*

proficient in English, having studied English as a core subject in China since elementary school, but academic, textbook, or workplace English does not often translate well for practical or spoken use. Universities could organize and encourage peer language tutoring, structured peer “conversation partners,” or stipends for ESL instruction as part of overseas students’ adjustment program. In the case of graduate students, universities could offer and arrange for domestic student tutors or language partners as a stepping-stone for students to gain ‘soft knowledge’ as well as language confidence. Confidence in language skills can also help Chinese students protect themselves in cases of abuse and navigate many other types of concerns.

Another simple—and tremendously under-appreciated—way that universities can improve the lives of Chinese students and attract scholars is with food. Students consistently mentioned food among the things they missed most about China. Often, food was what came to mind first, even before students mentioned their relatives. Students almost universally described their dislike of “American food,” which was regularly identified with burgers, hotdogs, salads, and “soggy” pasta, though several students optimistically told us that they had lost weight since coming to the U.S. Many American university administrators may be vaguely aware of this concern, but few seem to understand how important this is for students from China.

Students regularly told us that if they stay in the U.S., having access to the right restaurants and supermarkets is very important for them. One student commented about his deep appreciation when his doctoral advisor switched graduate student group meals from an “American restaurant” to a local PF Chang’s. More (and “authentic”) Chinese food options in university campuses and food courts would probably delight students of any nationality, but would especially please and help attract Chinese students.

Figure 5

**Post-Grad Location Preferences of Chinese Students**

<i>Approximate share of graduate student interviewees who indicated that they are ____.</i>	
Determined to immigrate to the U.S. or to another Western country.	25%
Likely to stay in the U.S. or another Western country for at least a few years after graduation, or for their first post-graduation job.	45-50%
Likely to return to China relatively soon after graduation.	15-20%
Determined to return to China as soon as possible after graduation.	10%



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Many universities already offer some services to international students along lines that we suggest. Most often, these resources take the form of an orientation program for international students first arriving on campus, short guidebooks with advice for living in the U.S., and sometimes university-sponsored affinity groups for students from a particular country or region. University administrators' next steps should be to monitor how such resources are being used or why some Chinese students might not be using or gaining from universities' offerings. It is clear to us that even at the wealthiest U.S. universities, many Chinese graduate students face challenges with language, socializing, or simply accessing healthcare, and do not receive or know about resources at their universities.

Many concerns of Chinese students may not affect their likelihood of enrolling in U.S. universities, or even in immigrating to the West. While some will be deterred, many Chinese students still come to the U.S. each year despite a lack of preferred cuisines or cultural familiarity. Even if such attributes are not central to students' decisions to come to the United States for studies, they may be central to how students look back on their experiences in U.S. universities and to students' decisions about whether to stay in the U.S. Though concerns like food might not directly affect enrollment yields or tuitions, they are simple and effective way to improve students' experiences and promote good feelings toward U.S. higher education.

While the pandemic hindered the movement of students and researchers between the U.S. and China, hundreds of thousands of students from mainland China came to American universities in the 2023-24 academic year. Despite a tumultuous past few years in American higher education, more Chinese students and scholars are likely to come to the U.S. in the fall of 2024. China's relaxation of pandemic-driven border restrictions, the slow re-opening of U.S.-China flight routes, and the Chinese government's new focus on promoting student exchanges present an opportunity for U.S. universities to renew efforts to attract students from China and form new plans for engaging international students.

*Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education  
Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions*

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## **Authors**

*Richard Yarrow is a Fellow at the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government at Harvard Kennedy School.*

*Victoria Li is a Research Assistant at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.*

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*Chinese Graduate Students' Experience of U.S. Higher Education  
Through Covid and U.S.-China Tensions*