

Opinion **Outlook**

## Why Chinese students are falling out of love with US universities

Geopolitical and financial tensions make parents think twice about sending their children to America

**PATTI WALDMEIR**



Chinese students at the University of Texas. F1 visas issued to Chinese mainlanders to study in the US fell 45 per cent in the six months to the end of September from the same period in 2019 © LM Otero/AP

**Patti Waldmeir** YESTERDAY

*The writer is a contributing columnist, based in Chicago*

Sino-US relations are at their worst since I began my love affair with China with the adoption of two Chinese infants 22 years ago, followed by eight years as the FT's Shanghai bureau chief. The news that only around half as many mainlanders are coming to the US to study now as before the pandemic seems a harbinger of worse to come. International students are like unofficial ambassadors between their cultures — halving that group will do nothing to heal the rift between the superpowers.

Some have argued that US president Joe Biden's new export controls on semiconductors amount to [declaring economic war against China](#) and president Xi Jinping's new leadership team. These kinds of geopolitical tensions have played a role in souring the Chinese view on studying in the US, according to Chinese educational consultants.

But based on interviews with Chinese students who cancelled or deferred plans to study in the US, and the consultants who advise them, there are plenty of other reasons too. These include China's property market crisis and the exorbitant cost of US university [education](#), as well as America's reputation for shocking gun violence, growing anti-Asian racism and pandemic-related travel problems. The targeting of Chinese academics on US campuses as spies during the Trump administration also

did nothing to help.

Years of explosive growth in the number of Chinese students in America had begun to plateau even before the pandemic, but numbers have plummeted since then. F1 student visas issued to Chinese mainlanders fell 45 per cent in the six months to the end of September from the comparable period in 2019, US state department figures show.

Mainlanders are still going overseas to study, but more are choosing the UK, Singapore and Hong Kong, educational consultants say. Chinese students in the UK rose by 50 per cent between 2016-17 and 2020-21. And India displaced China in US student visa rankings over the past six months. F1 visas for Indian students rose to 87,029, well above China's 49,959, and almost three times the figure for India before the pandemic.

Janet, who prepares Chinese students to study overseas and declined to give her full name due to political concerns, tells me social media portrayals of crime in the US are a big factor. She says: "Families are asking me, 'is America still safe? Are Chinese students getting discriminated against there?'" Everyone I spoke to mentioned the fatal shooting in broad daylight of a Chinese student near the campus of the prestigious University of Chicago. I can sympathise: my Chinese daughter has just started a masters degree there, only to have three shootings (one deadly) outside her apartment building in the first weeks of term.

Janet is now providing self-defence lessons to clients applying to study in the US: "before we just taught students how to write essays, now we're teaching them martial arts". She says families who might previously have prioritised the US now keep their options open. She also worries that the US tightening of visa restrictions for Chinese students on security grounds will make more families shy away from there. One of her students was denied a visa to study game design in the US this year. "This is the first time I've seen an undergraduate applicant rejected . . . and I don't think it will be the only case," she tells me.

Several consultants say China's economic crisis, and the weakening renminbi, are making parents more price sensitive. "Previously you had large numbers of very affluent students applying to the US because it was just like another handbag they needed to have," says one Chinese educational consultant, who also declined to give his name. It's cheaper to get a degree in the UK, where in most cases undergraduate study takes three years rather than four, he says. He notes, though, that top US universities, where the annual cost can be \$90,000 for a Chinese student, have seen

no decline — lower ranked schools have suffered more.

But geopolitical tensions loom larger all the time in parents' minds, he says.

“Everyone is afraid their kid may not be able to complete their education” if Beijing attacks Taiwan and the US restricts visas for mainlanders as a result. That makes studying anywhere but the US much more appealing.

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