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Amid Declining U.S. Enrollment, Many Chinese Students Cite Negative Experiences

September 10, 2025 FEATURE | By Frank Laczko and Neli Esipova

Approximately one-quarter of all international students in the United States come from China. Despite a recent fall in numbers, the United States remains the top destination for Chinese students studying internationally, with 277,000 attending U.S. universities and colleges in the 2023-24 school year.

Yet the future of Chinese student migration to the United States is highly uncertain. In May 2025, the U.S. State Department announced it would “aggressively revoke” visas of certain Chinese students, especially those affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party or studying in “critical fields” which likely include advanced science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Although the administration backed off the restrictions amid trade negotiations with Beijing, and in fact President Donald Trump has since said the government would admit 600,000 Chinese students, it has maintained an unprecedented focus on scrutinizing international students. As of August, the administration had reportedly revoked the visas for some 6,000 students of varied nationalities.

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This posture comes on top of an environment that many Chinese students say has been turning them off the United States. Even before the proposed restrictions, many Chinese students said they felt they had been treated poorly in the United States, with at least 60 percent claiming they faced discrimination, in a survey conducted as part of the authors’ research. This treatment and other factors were cited by many students who said they wanted to return to China.

U.S. universities and employers have expressed concerns about reductions in international student enrollment. Chinese and other international students, who typically pay higher tuition than U.S.-born students, boost the finances of U.S. universities and colleges as well as the country’s economic outlook more broadly. In the 2023-24 school year, international students contributed more than \$43.8 billion to the U.S. economy, according to NAFSA: The Association of International Educators. Many Chinese STEM graduates are also highly sought after in the U.S. labor market; China was the second largest origin country for immigrants receiving H-1B temporary visas for highly skilled foreign workers in

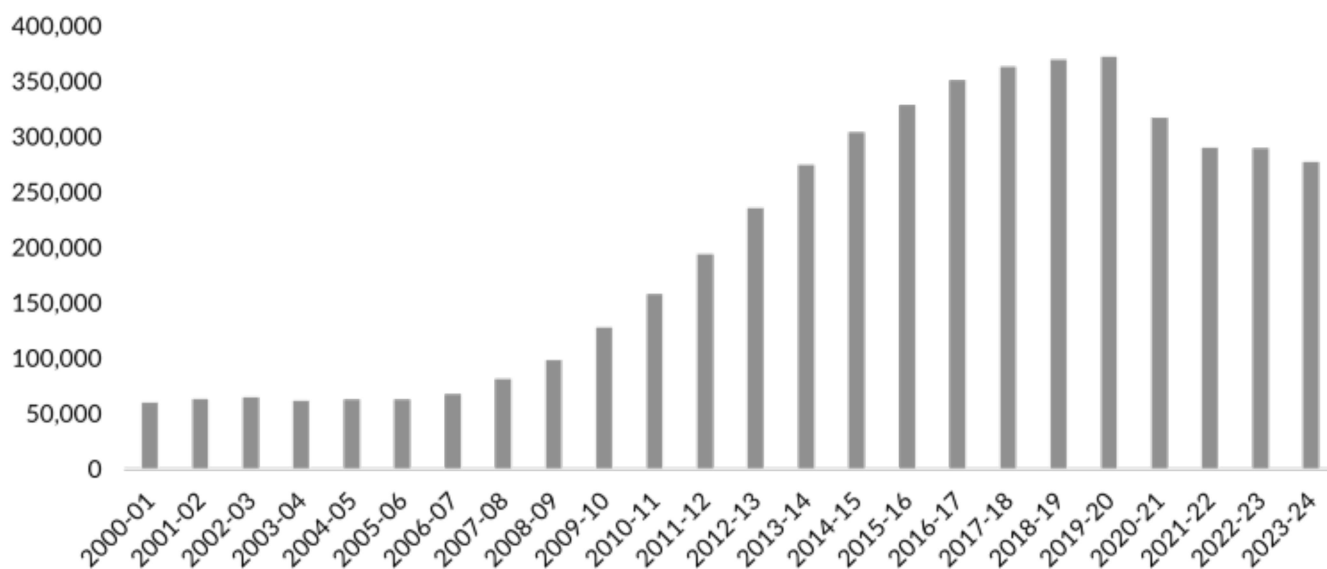
fiscal year (FY) 2024, after India.

This article provides insights on the trends in Chinese student migration to the United States and the recent experiences of these students. It is based in part on 2024 research by Multicultural Insights, conducted by the authors and other researchers, which surveyed nearly 1,300 Chinese students in the United States. The findings help explain why students were roughly equally split between those intending to remain in the United States and those planning to return to China eventually. Despite the difficulties that many students said they faced, most also expressed a desire to work in the United States after their studies, either temporarily or permanently.

Trends in Chinese Student Migration

More than 3 million individuals from China have been educated at U.S. colleges and universities since the late 1970s, following economic and social reforms in China that opened the country more fully to the world. But Chinese student enrollment has fallen rapidly since the 2019-20 school year, when a record 373,000 were studying in the United States, to 277,000 in 2023-24 (see Figure 1). For many years China was the main country of origin for international students on U.S. higher education campuses, but now it is in second place behind India, which was the origin for nearly 332,000 students in 2023-24.

Figure 1. International Students in the United States from China, School Year 2000-01 to 2023-24



Source: Institute of International Education, "International Students by Place of Origin, Selected Years, 1949/50 - 2023/24," 2024, [available online](#).

Part of this decline was due to COVID-19-related restrictions on mobility in 2020 and 2021, which were more pronounced and lasted longer in China than in many other countries globally. Several other destination countries saw a similarly sharp fall in the numbers of Chinese students during this time. But while restrictions have eased, the U.S. decline has not halted. This suggests that several factors are affecting Chinese students' decision to come to the United States—or not.

U.S. Policy towards Chinese Students

The United States has a long history of restricting immigration from China, dating back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited arrivals of Chinese workers. Many prominent U.S.

voices viewed Chinese immigrants as a threat to jobs and culture; the law was not repealed until 1943. Today, there is a great deal of geopolitical tension between the United States and China, which can be seen in many areas. For example, various U.S. states have passed laws restricting Chinese individuals and corporations from buying land, in response to fears that these purchases threaten U.S. security.

Indeed, many restrictions targeting the Chinese born—including students—have been justified by security concerns. Trump in 2020 signed a proclamation barring Chinese students and researchers with ties to China’s military from obtaining visas. However, confirmed cases of Chinese students spying are rare, especially in comparison with the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students in the United States.

Restrictive U.S. measures are by no means solely a feature of the Trump administration. Under President Joe Biden’s administration, the United States rejected 36 percent of student visa applications from China in 2023—then a record high. Independent of policy, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, the United States also witnessed an uptick in instances of discrimination and hate crimes targeting people of Asian descent, including Chinese immigrants.

More recently, in May 2025, the Trump administration announced the previously mentioned new restrictions on Chinese international students but then swiftly scaled them back, creating a great deal of uncertainty. China publicly condemned the U.S. actions, calling them “politically motivated and discriminatory,” and lodged a formal complaint. But some commentators have suggested that China’s policy towards these students is more nuanced, as Beijing has consistently encouraged Chinese students to return to China after their period of study abroad. At the same time, the Chinese government itself has raised questions of allegiance of U.S.-educated Chinese who return to China.

To be sure, the United States is not the only country restricting international students. Other high-income countries including Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have also sought to reduce student visa issuances, due to concerns about the rising scale of net migration (in the United Kingdom) or pressures on housing (in Australia and Canada). Still, with the United States the top destination for international students globally, its restrictions are especially resonant.

Box 1. Methods

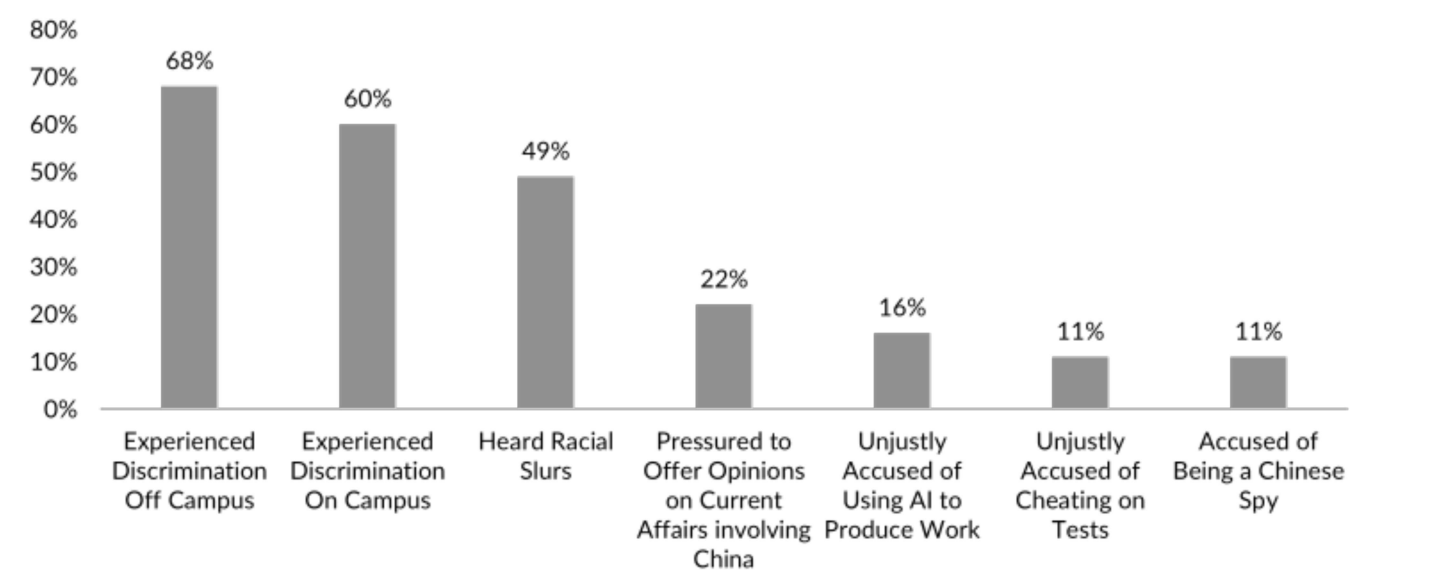
Data in this section derive from an online survey of 1,252 Chinese graduate students and two focus group interviews with eight Chinese students each in 2024, conducted by Multicultural Insights. Students were from mainland China, and not Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan. The survey was intended to examine the factors influencing these students’ decisions to remain in the United States or return to China after completing their studies.

The study focused mainly on graduate students studying in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, but also included some graduate students studying social sciences. The study was one of the largest surveys of U.S.-based Chinese students conducted since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

What Chinese Students Say

Many U.S.-based Chinese students surveyed by Multicultural Insights reported very poor experiences (see Figure 2). Sixty-eight percent said they had experienced discrimination off campus, and 60 percent reported discrimination on campus in interactions with fellow students and staff. Approximately half the students claimed that they had been verbally harassed or knew of other Chinese students who had been abused; many said they had been told to “go home” or go “back to your own country.” Smaller but nonetheless notable numbers of students claimed they were unjustly accused of being spies or of cheating.

Figure 2. Chinese Students’ Experiences in the United States, 2024



Source: Igor Himelfarb, Neli Esipova, Frank Laczko, and Alexander Anokhin, *Study of Chinese Graduate Students in the United States: A Multidimensional Survey* (N.p.: Multicultural Insights, 2024), [available online](#).

Students who said they experienced discrimination on campus were 4.6 times more likely to plan to return to China, while those who faced discrimination off campus were 3.8 times more likely to want to leave the United States. Those who reported dismissive behavior by their professors also indicated that they were more likely to want to return to China.

Benefits of Living in the United States

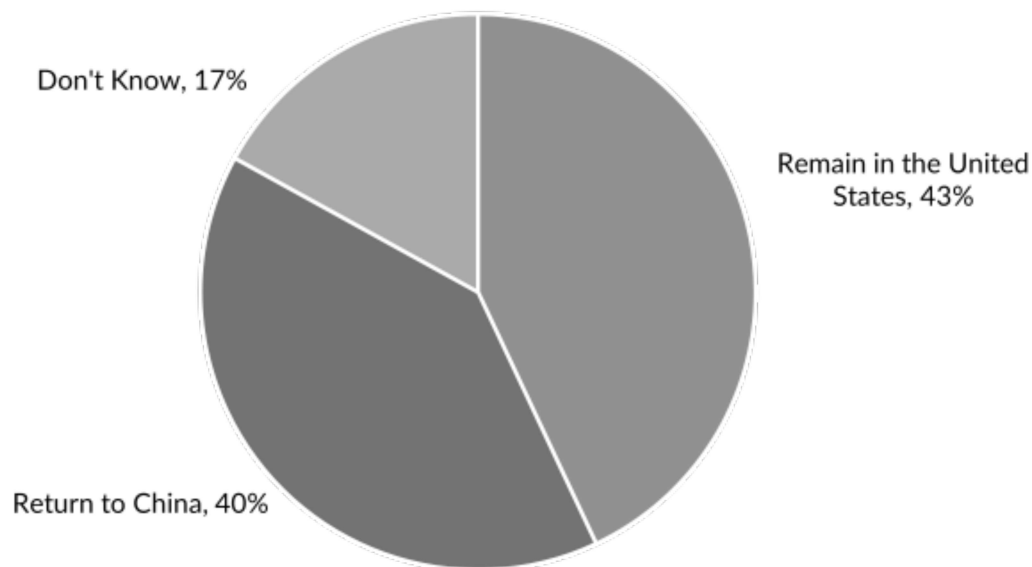
However, many Chinese students also made positive comments about the United States. Nearly three-quarters reported they chose U.S. study because they wanted to “experience life” there, and roughly two-thirds said they did so because they wanted the best education possible. Indeed, 64 percent of students reported that they believed the quality of education is better in the United States than China.

Many students cited the personal benefits of living in the United States, including more freedom. For example, a third-year doctoral student in economics said he faced discrimination in the United States due to his Chinese origin, but also that, as a member of the LGBTQ community, he found more acceptance, openness, and respect regarding sexuality.

Stay or Return?

Chinese students were roughly split on their migration intentions after graduation, with a slight plurality hoping to remain (see Figure 3). Female students were more likely to want to stay in the United States: 48 percent indicated a desire to remain and 33 percent planned to leave, compared to 40 percent of men who planned to remain and 43 percent who intended to return. The reasons for these gender differences are unclear. The main reason for wanting to stay in the United States, stated by more than one-third of students who hoped to remain, was the economic prospects.

Figure 3. Postgraduation Intentions of Chinese Students Enrolled in U.S. Institutions, to Return or Stay, 2024



Note: Many respondents indicating they intended to return to China did not plan to do so immediately after graduation, and in some cases hoped to obtain visas allowing them to remain in the United States for several additional years before eventually leaving.

Source: Himelfarb, Esipova, Laczko, and Anokhin, *Study of Chinese Graduate Students in the United States: A Multidimensional Survey*.

Family reunification was the main reason cited for returning to China, mentioned by 41 percent of those planning to go back, followed by economic prospects in China (cited by 23 percent). Twenty-one percent of planned returnees cited U.S. discrimination as a motivating factor. Very few students mentioned being influenced by specific programs launched by China to attract returnees, such as the Thousand Talents Plan. Created in 2008, this government effort offers substantial financial incentives and grants to bring leading Chinese-born scientists and engineers back to China.

It is important to note that many students reporting they would like to return to China did not intend to do so immediately, and first planned to look for temporary work in the United States. After completing their studies, nearly three-quarters of all respondents—and two-thirds of those intending to return to China—planned to apply for Optional Practical Training (OPT), which allows international students to work in the United States for up to 12 months (or 36 months for STEM graduates) in their field of study. Key Trump administration officials have called for ending OPT, and its future remains uncertain. Additionally, 56 percent of all respondents—including 24 percent of students intending to return to China—hoped to obtain an H-1B visa, which would generally permit them to remain and work in the United States for up to six years.

Many Chinese students also see their long-term future in the United States: 42 percent said they planned to apply for U.S. legal permanent residence (LPR status, also known as getting a green card) and 29 percent wished to become U.S. citizens. For context, 55 percent of all 2.4 million Chinese immigrants in the United States were naturalized citizens as of 2023, and the 24,000 Chinese immigrants who became U.S. citizens in FY 2024 were the seventh largest national-origin group. (China does not allow dual nationality, so people from China who become citizens of another country must renounce their Chinese citizenship.)

Future Student Migration in Flux

In prior years, policymakers in both China and the United States broadly accepted rising student migration, with some reservations mainly linked to security concerns. Chinese student migration has

provided a key source of revenue for U.S. academic institutions and a ready supply of highly skilled workers for the U.S. labor market. China has also gained from the movement, as many students return with excellent qualifications and U.S. work experience. Even if Chinese students remain in the United States long term, their presence can boost trade links and business cooperation and investment between the two countries.

Today, it is less clear how Washington and Beijing view the future of this migration. Overall, there seems to be little dialogue between the two countries to clearly articulate and agree upon what both sides expect from the complex China-U.S. migration relationship, of which students comprise only one part. For example, results of the authors' survey were first presented in Beijing in May 2024 at a high-level policy conference organized by a major Chinese think tank, the Center for China and Globalization; few U.S. government representatives attended the conference.

Three key factors are likely to shape future Chinese student migration patterns. First, it is becoming more attractive for students to study in China, as the quality of Chinese academic institutes has improved and top universities score high marks in global rankings. China's population is also declining, and the school-age population is expected to contract significantly, reducing the pool of students who might seek to study abroad.

Second, international competition within the international education sector and for STEM workers is increasing. A likely future scenario is that an increasing number of Chinese students decide to study in countries other than the United States. This is already happening, with both Canada and the United Kingdom seeing more Chinese-born students in 2023 than in 2019, pre-pandemic.

Third, U.S. policies aimed at restricting students from China are likely to deter more students from coming to the United States and do little to combat the negative experiences Chinese students in the United States already face.

A further decline in Chinese student migration to the United States would likely result in a considerable loss of income for U.S. educational institutions and could have ripple effects in the U.S. economy. Other countries are investing heavily in attracting STEM students. Many companies and industries rely on advanced technologies, and attracting STEM workers is often seen as essential for maintaining a competitive advantage in the global market. According to one estimate by the Semiconductor Industry Association, there will be a STEM shortage of approximately 1.4 million technicians, computer scientists, and engineers in the United States by 2030.

The U.S. debate about student immigration, like that in many high-income countries, has focused on numbers and efforts to reduce admissions through immigration policy. However, there is need for a much broader policy discussion, focusing on how best to balance U.S. education, labor, and immigration policies and develop innovative solutions for the future. This discussion should include a focus on reducing discrimination against the international students already resident in the United States and people of minority ancestry more broadly. This type of broader discussion about the future of student migration is already happening in many other high-income countries, where the benefits of international education have often been felt unevenly. Thus, there is much that the United States could potentially learn from other countries as it seeks to develop new approaches to managing student immigration.

As the survey responses show, however, policy is only one factor at play. Negative experiences for Chinese-born students could dampen their interest in studying at U.S. institutions in the first place.

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