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Class of 2025

The New Calculus for Chinese Students in America

Advisor: David Ewalt

The New Calculus for Chinese Students in America

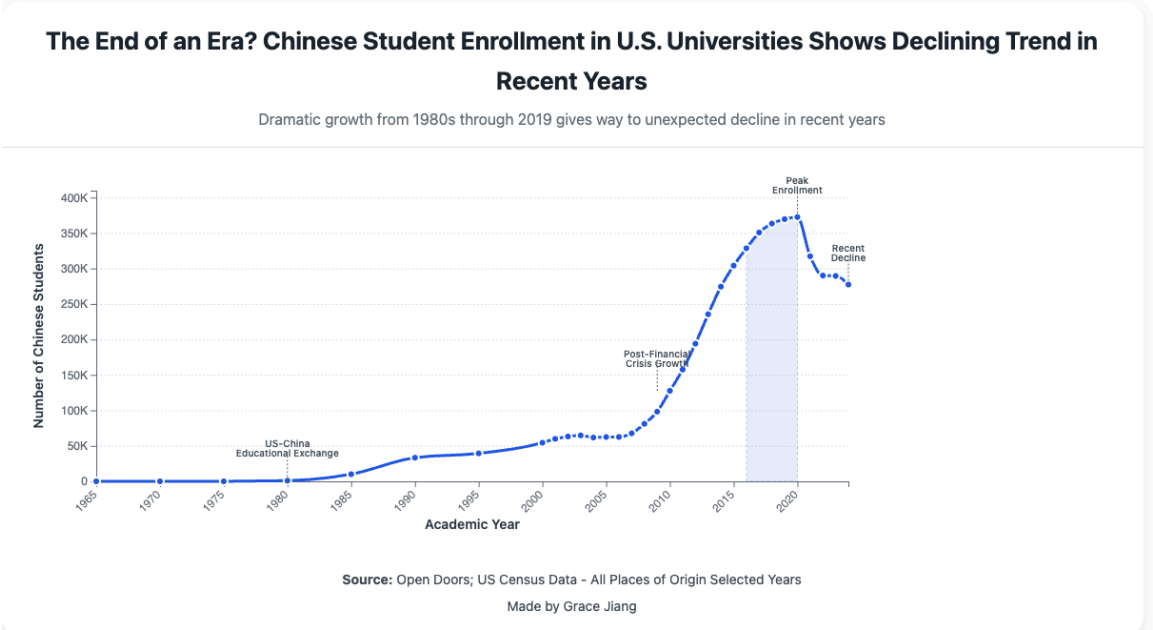
Prestige still matters, but for many, U.S. education is now just a short stop before returning home.

After the U.S. government's suspension of foreign student visa interviews in late May, Siting Dai, a Chinese student, set to begin her master's degree in statistics at the University of Southern California in early August. Her phone buzzed with updates from Chinese classmates: frantic group chats, shared news links and rumors about indefinite delays. But Dai remained calm. "My school has been asking about everyone's visa progress and mentioned that we can defer to Spring '26 or next fall if needed," she said in a video interview, while sipping tea in a café. "Right now, we don't need to make any decisions, just wait."

For Dai, who had already tried and failed to get into a domestic graduate program, the decision to go abroad was less about chasing the "American dream" and more about taking a side route to a career in China. "My parents told me that studying abroad is essentially a form of consumption," she said. "They said I shouldn't worry about getting my money back. Just go experience it, feel it out and broaden my horizons."

Like Dai, many Chinese nationals are increasingly disillusioned with U.S. education and the prospect of staying in the U.S. after graduation. To them, America is no longer a dream but merely a pragmatic option. As geopolitical tensions and domestic competition

intensifies, applications from Chinese students to U.S. universities have dropped over 18% from their peak two years ago.



[This is an interactive data visualization. Link: https://github.com/gracejiang0612/MP-dataviz; chinese_student_population.html]

The U.S. State Department's suspension, announced in late May, paused new F, M, and J visa interviews for nearly three weeks before resuming on June 18. Those visas are all nonimmigrant visas for individuals coming to the United States for educational or cultural exchange purposes. Officials said the break was necessary to update and expand national security checks, including new requirements for all applicants to set their social media profiles to "public," so consular officers could review them. The change triggered headlines and social media chatter in China — but for many students, it was a blip, not a

deterrent, and increased student visa interviews and social media censorship haven't significantly impacted their behavior.

Dai had been accepted into USC's master's program in statistics back in March. Then, in April, an illness led to surgery. She hadn't applied for her visa interview by the time news broke that the United States was suspending new student visa appointments. Now she remains unworried about the newly implemented Enhanced Social Media Vetting and Resumption of Visa policy. "I basically only post nonsense," she said. "I don't follow things that don't interest me, and I don't like paying attention to national affairs."

Shuqing Cao, another student headed to the United States this fall, had an equally straightforward view. She will begin a master's in economics at Vanderbilt University, and the spring visa chaos didn't touch her plans. She had attended a joint program between Beijing Institute of Technology and Utah State University, earning an American degree without ever leaving China. Among her classmates, she was one of the few applying exclusively to U.S. graduate schools. "Many of my classmates applied to programs in the U.K. because they were attracted to the shorter program length and the schools' QS rankings [are high]," she said.

In China's job market, the ranking of overseas universities where graduates studied is extremely important. The higher the university's ranking, the more capable companies perceive the candidate to be. Chinese students frequently use QS, U.S. News and FT ranking publications as references when applying for university, according to the Graduate Management Admission Council's 2025 Prospective Students Survey.

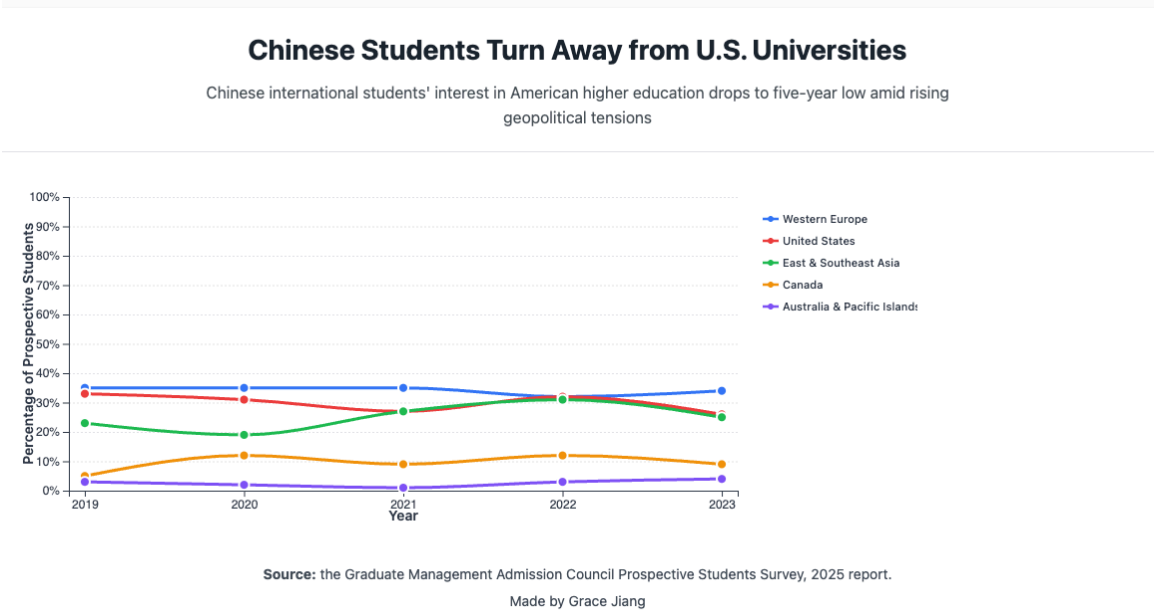
Part of Cao's calculation is the fierce competition in China's domestic graduate school system. "It feels like the competition at home is really intense," she said. "For studying abroad, we mostly just need to take language tests, which I find relatively simple. If you're taking domestic graduate exams, you have to study specialized subjects, mathematics, and English is still required, the difficulty seems higher than applying abroad."

Statistics bear out her experience. According to the latest Open Doors Report on International Exchange, undergraduates made up just 30 percent of Chinese students in the U.S. in 2023, with roughly half pursuing graduate degrees.

Cao's application process was smooth: she received her offer in March, interviewed for her visa in May, and got her F-1 stamp without delay. But ease of entry doesn't make her want to stay in the U.S. any longer than she has to.

"My friends and I are basically all planning to return to work [in China]," she said. "I haven't heard anyone say they want to stay. At most, they want to intern there, but ultimately they're all coming back. I'm studying abroad mainly to get a good degree and find a better job back home."

At home, China's job market is still struggling to recover from the pandemic, creating a real challenge for booming numbers of college graduates. The 2025 College Graduate Employment Supply and Demand Insight Report released by Connectivity Community Think Tank Center estimates a record 12.22 million graduates this year. More than half of recent graduates on the Chinese job platform Liepin have only a bachelor's degree; the share with a master's increased from 15.92 percent to 17.1 percent. That means in order to stand out in the crowds, many middle-class students consider a graduate degree, from anywhere, a necessity and not a luxury.

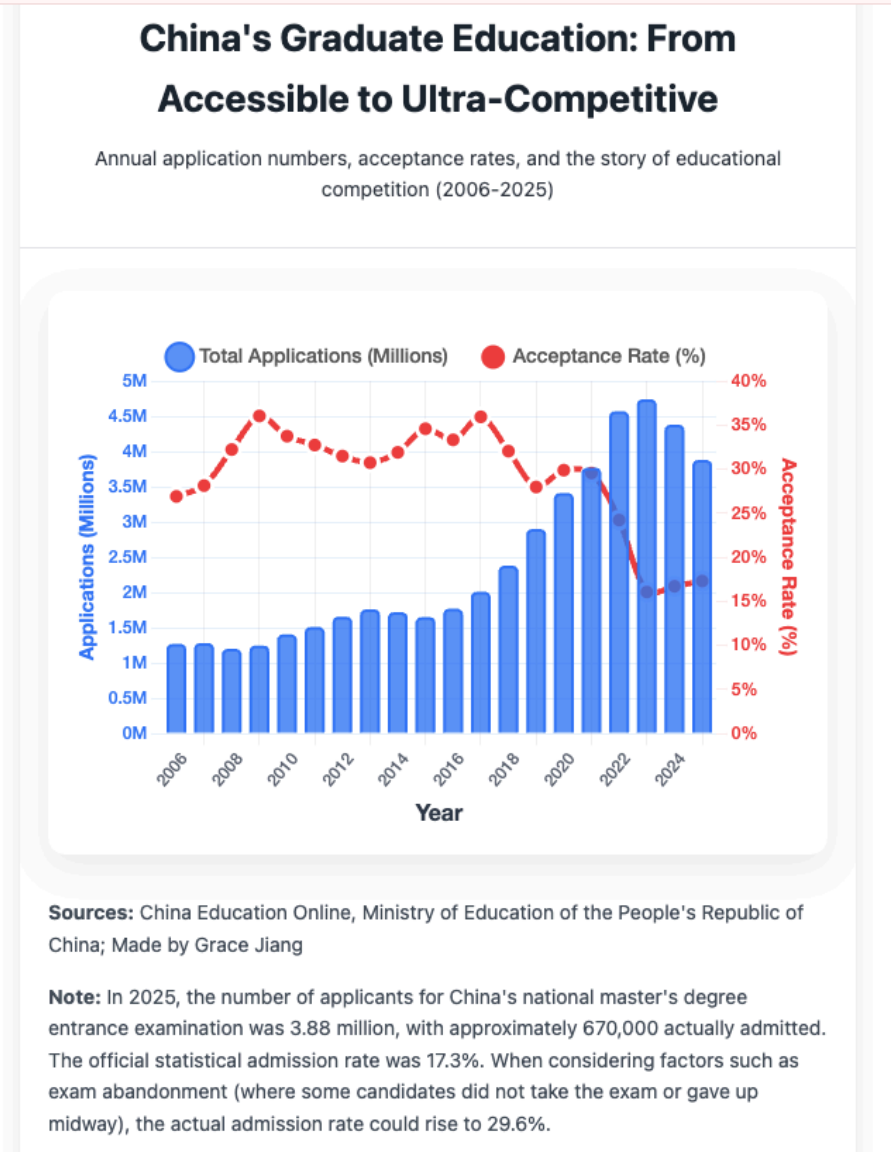


[This is an interactive data visualization. Link: https://github.com/gracejiang0612/MP-dataviz; study_destinations_chart.html]

The appeal of getting a degree in the U.S. has shifted. According to the Graduate Management Admission Council report 2025, in 2023, just 26 percent of test-takers in Greater China preferred to attend a university in the U.S., the lowest share in six years. By 2024, that figure had climbed back to 39 percent, ahead of Western Europe, Canada, and Asia. But the nature of the interest had changed.

Shuqi Bao embodies that shift. This fall, she will start a master's degree program in Technology Management at NYU's Tandon School of Engineering. Like Cao, she earned a Utah State degree through a joint program in Beijing — an option she chose after a disappointing score on the Gaokao, China's national college entrance exam. Her parents paid higher tuition for the foreign diploma, betting it would make her more competitive

in the future. But the plan was always to come back. “My father doesn’t want me to stay in America,” she said. “His intention is just for me to get a graduate degree — the country doesn’t matter.”



[This is an interactive data visualization. Link: https://github.com/gracejiang0612/MP-dataviz; complete_index_html.html]

Bao said her father doesn't believe life in America is better than life in China. He feels uneasy about America's security situation, especially the prevalence of guns, and would rather have his daughter stay close to home, where he can look out for her and keep her safe. He sees no reason to put his child in a potentially unsafe place, she said.

Bao applied to 17 graduate programs, 14 in the U.S., and didn't have to take English tests thanks to her American undergraduate credentials. Her choice of NYU came down to experience, not immigration prospects, and the visa changes didn't shake her. "I worried about this for a while," she said. "Then I checked on Rednote (a Chinese social media platform) and found that most people who had their visas mysteriously revoked had some kind of legal violations. I think if you go there and study properly, there shouldn't be any real problems."

In China, social media users must register accounts using real-name verification. When posting, certain political keywords are blocked and cannot be published. Posts may also be automatically deleted when they reach a certain number of views, and in serious cases, the nation's cyber police may visit people's homes to issue warnings. As a result, very few people discuss political topics on Chinese social media platforms.

Another factor, the Gaokao, China's national college entrance exam, looms over all decisions about higher education. Every June, millions of students sit for the two-day test, which determines admission to universities across the country. In 2025, 13.35 million students registered, the second-highest count in nearly a decade. But because educational resources are uneven, opportunities are not equal: In Shanghai, 79 percent of students secured a spot in an undergraduate program, compared to just 30 percent in Sichuan

province. That means for some parents, overseas study can be an important second option.

Albert Yang has built a business on that reality. A Purdue graduate who first came to the U.S. in high school, he now runs a study abroad consulting company in China, specializing in guiding students from top international schools into U.S. universities. Many of his clients are Gaokao underperformers, or kids ill-suited to China's high-pressure exam system. For them, Yang maps out a path through California's community colleges and into universities like UC Irvine or UC Davis via transfer guarantees. "These children's parents have foreseen the brutality of the Gaokao and know their children's abilities are better suited to systems that aren't so rigid," he said.

Yang's clientele is wealthy, mostly families with assets between 10 and 100 million RMB ($1.4 million to $14 million). Before the pandemic, many of them dreamed about their children building lives in the U.S. But that changed after Donald Trump's return to the presidency. "Basically no parents express this desire anymore," Yang said. "They don't want their children taking such risks. When the winds of the times fall on ordinary people, it becomes a mountain."

It has also gotten more difficult for Chinese students to obtain jobs in the U.S. Most international students working in the US need H1B sponsorship, Yang said, but in recent years the number of companies willing to provide sponsorship has been steadily declining —let alone those willing to support green card applications.

In China, being a recent graduate fresh out of university offers a significant advantage for job hunting, Yang said. When staying to work in the U.S. involves so many uncertainties, and means missing out on opportunities for career development back home,many students are to return to China, and its more stable path forward.

Yang's observations match those of Liz Chen, an English teacher at Kang Chiao International School's Kunshan campus, and the mother of two children studying as undergraduates in the United States. She has watched enthusiasm for U.S. education ebb and swell over the past decade.

She remembers 2019, the year before the pandemic, as the peak. The school hallways buzzed with seniors headed to Boston, Los Angeles, Seattle. Then, in 2020, the gates slammed shut: no flights, no in-person classes, students taking U.S. college courses from their bedrooms in Shanghai or Kunshan, keeping odd hours to match New York or Chicago time. When restrictions were lifted, they arrived in the U.S. already sophomores or juniors, skipping the first-year rituals.

"But the desire to study in America never really went away," Chen said. "It was just delayed."

Or even pushed earlier."We've seen students apply to transfer from our school to American high schools," she said

Chen explained that attending high school in the United States gives students earlier exposure to an all-English learning environment, and better access to top universities.

However, since U.S. high school education requires a much larger financial investment, it's typically only an option for wealthy families.

"When we talk with parents, we often discover that some have studied abroad themselves," Chen said. "These parents found their overseas education valuable and want their children to have a different kind of educational experience. Some choose the international track because they don't think their children can compete effectively within China's system."

But that still doesn't mean these parents want their children to permanently stay in the United States.

"During admissions, we make sure we're aligned with parents on educational philosophy," Chen said. "We tell families that we hope students will return home to serve their country after graduation. Parents actually respond well to this message. It probably reflects the fact that most Chinese families ultimately want their children nearby."

Howard Chen, no relation, is one such parent. He is preparing to send his child to an American high school, hoping they can absorb multicultural influences before their worldview hardens. "America is a kaleidoscope," he said. "It's an extremely free land where you have outstanding people and terrible places too. If we only look at academic scores, the average might not match China's, but the gap between the best and worst is enormous. You have many excellent people and many poor ones. You can't judge only by averages."

His own Chinese education, he added, left him with a rigid mindset. Working alongside American colleagues later in life was an awakening. “When American colleagues encounter problems, their vision is completely open, unrestricted, unbound,” he said. “I realized the education I received from childhood was problematic.”

Even for parents drawn to U.S. education, the reality of navigating visas and geopolitics can be sobering. Liz Chen recalled how the May 2025 visa interview suspension echoed 2020’s restrictions on Chinese STEM graduates from top universities. “Top students face greater setbacks,” she said. “Like a pyramid, their needs differ from middle and bottom students. The reasons might include an inability to accept domestic learning models or inability to get into good domestic schools with their grades, so they turn to studying abroad.”

The 2020 restrictions outlined in Presidential Proclamation 10043 barred entry to many Chinese graduate students with ties to certain institutions, citing national security. It remains a shadow over sensitive fields of study.

Yuanzhen Wang, who earned both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in pharmaceutical engineering in China, experienced that shadow firsthand. She had an opportunity to join a Ph.D. program at Minnesota State University arranged through a professor’s postdoctoral research. But in December of 2024, before anything was finalized, she was warned that funding might not come through.

Her family wasn't enthusiastic, as well. "Because domestic social media has some exaggerated content, they weren't very supportive," she said. That hesitation, combined with funding uncertainty, led her to decline the offer.

Wang is an accomplished researcher by any measure: three first-author papers in high-impact journals, two in the top quartile of their fields. Yet she describes China's research culture as "toxic," rife with hierarchy and verbal abuse. She had hoped a U.S. Ph.D. would offer an escape. Instead, she accepted a place at Northwestern Polytechnical University in Xi'an, an institution on the U.S. sanctions list, effectively closing off her chances for postdoctoral work in America.

"I feel very upset," she said. "The strongest programs in our field are in America. But if I want to apply for postdocs, this path is basically cut off because my school is sanctioned."

Visa realities compound the problem. In sensitive STEM fields, student visas are often valid for just a year, and administrative processing can stretch for months. "It makes it difficult to return home for visits or participate in international academic exchanges," Wang said. Her ideal scenario would be simple: remove academic restrictions, restore freedom of movement, and ensure reliable funding. "If entry and exit could be freer without constant worry, even 20-plus-hour flights would be acceptable."

Germaine Tang, who will soon start a Ph.D. in biostatistics at Case Western Reserve University, knows that processing delays aren't hypothetical. She had already been flagged for administrative review when applying for her master's student visa years

earlier. “Biostatistics is somewhat sensitive,” she said. “Some classmates were also processed while others got five-year visas without issues.”

Biostatistics is considered a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) field and is classified as a sensitive major. Student visas are issued with different validity periods of either one year or five years. If a major is deemed sensitive or the visa officer believes a student lacks sufficient ties to their home country, they will only receive a one-year student visa.

Due to recent U.S. student visa suspensions, many applicants in China had been stuck waiting for an interview, but when processing resumed and interview slots opened up, they were snatched up immediately. Afraid that she might not get a spot, Tang decided to apply for her visa from Singapore, where she had completed her undergraduate degree and she was granted a five-year student visa.

“I think I got the five-year visa because I have strong ties to Singapore that would bring me back,” Tang said. “The interviewing officer asked me twice how long I’d been in Singapore. Two years ago, the visa officer in Shanghai had a relatively low approval rate, but this time in Singapore, the officer had a much better approval rate.”

While they don’t have the same security issues as STEM majors, other Chinese students have seen their own issues getting into humanities programs. June Ma, a University of Chicago sociology Ph.D. student, said her program admitted just three students this year, down from the usual seven to nine, with no waitlist. She said it’s a reflection of tightened budgets, and how funding pressures can hit the humanities hardest. “We belong to the

group that should be easiest and least affected," she said, "but we're often the most vulnerable. Everyone thinks these majors can be cut back, while STEM is more important."

Ma first came to the U.S. for a master's after studying law at Fudan University. She also had offers from Hong Kong and Cambridge, but chose North America after calculating both "push" and "pull" factors: a desire to escape what she saw as China's deepening structural problems, and a belief that the U.S. system would be better for her research ambitions.

Today, she watches friends in STEM navigate unpredictable visa outcomes. One of them, a math Ph.D. student at Harvard, returned home for the summer, and is still stuck in administrative review, unable to return. "Humanities might be relatively safe," she said, "but STEM students definitely need to find other places to study."

Once her own degree is done, Ma is unsure whether she'll remain in America. She said she fears that staying would mean "worrying that overcoming the obstacles of this mountain might require decades of effort from an ordinary person."

The constant worrying, weighing risk against reward, has become part of the study-abroad process for every Chinese student. Students trade rumors in chat groups. Parents quietly consult friends with government connections. Consultants remind clients to scrub their social media and prepare financial proofs.

Yet the pipeline continues. The motivations have changed — prestige still matters, but so does hedging against an unpredictable domestic system. Few talk anymore about settling permanently in the U.S. Instead, the degree itself is the prize, to be cashed in back home.

On a humid evening in Shanghai, Bao, the NYU-bound master's student, scrolled through Xiaohongshu posts tagged #VisaTips. Her father walked past, glancing at her phone. "Just focus on your studies when you get there," he said. "Don't worry about anything else."

In the glow of the phone, the dream of America looked less like an escape and more like a waypoint —one stop on a journey that now had a clear return date.

Methodology

To understand the underlying reasons why Chinese students choose American study abroad under current circumstances, I interviewed 13 Chinese students, including undergraduates, graduate students, and PhD students, as well as parents of American high school students and study abroad consulting company representatives.

I primarily used data from The Open Doors Report, Graduate Management Admission Council and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. I initially collected data through Python web scraping, but my connection was banned by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. So I used a VPN to access China and manually collect data for my story. I used D3 and Adobe Illustrator for data visualization. Here is the github repo including all data sources: https://github.com/gracejiang0612/MP-dataviz

Like all research, my analysis has limitations and cannot represent all Chinese international students' perspectives. Additionally, I participated in multiple Columbia University International Student Services Q&A sessions on Immigration Policy, gaining deep awareness of current study abroad policy volatility.

Sources:

Human source

Richard Chen Contact-Wechat:howard_chen11

Suzanne Huo Contact-Wechat:hyx-Ari

Liz Chen Contact-Wechat:Kaili_Liz

Siting Dai Contact-Wechat:peppermint1007

Shuqi Bao Contact-Wechat:SQ_lucky_77

Jane Ma Contact-Wechat:aristophanes_jy

Yuanzhen Wang Contact-Wechat:wxid_0wkvkwsu5ktn22

Germaine Tang Contact-Wechat:TRS877

Albert Yang Contact-Wechat:wdymthough

Data source

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Postscript

This story began not with breaking news or a tip, but with a personal realization. As a Chinese international student at Columbia, I witnessed firsthand the anxiety rippling through Chinese student communities when the State Department suspended visa interviews in late May. What struck me wasn't the panic, it was the pragmatic resignation. Students in WeChat groups weren't talking about abandoning their dreams; they were discussing deferrals, backup plans and alternative interview locations with the same matter-of-fact tone they might use to discuss course schedules.

The disconnect between media coverage portraying the crisis and the actual student response intrigued me. I realized that the conventional narrative about Chinese students desperately pursuing the "American dream" might be outdated. The real story seemed to be about how motivations and expectations had fundamentally shifted.

As a Chinese student, I had natural access to the communities I wanted to study, but I was careful not to assume my experience was universal. I started with classmates and expanded through introductions, eventually conducting 13 in-depth interviews across different degree levels and geographic locations.

My original plan involved comprehensive web scraping of Chinese education ministry data, but I hit an immediate roadblock when the ministry's website blocked my access. This forced me to adapt, so I used a VPN to locate myself in China and manually collect data, a more time-consuming but ultimately more thorough approach that helped me better understand what information was publicly available to Chinese families.

I really appreciate my advisor — David M. Ewalt, for his unwavering support throughout this project. He encouraged every idea I brought to him, responded to my messages with remarkable speed, and provided invaluable guidance in refining my final piece.