

American students in China face a barrage of questions about Trump

The number of U.S. students in China has plummeted, but those who are there now say it's more important than ever for Americans to understand the country.

Today at 5:00 a.m. EDT



By [Katrina Northrop](#)

Susan St.Denis likes to think of herself as a “free diplomat.”

With fewer than 900 American students in China at a time of unprecedented bilateral tensions, Chinese classmates continually ask her to explain President Donald Trump’s decisions, while American friends and family ask her to translate the intricacies of Chinese politics.

“I am constantly on call and I have to constantly be ready to answer questions,” said St.Denis, who is earning a graduate degree in Chinese politics at Beijing’s Tsinghua University. “There’s a lot of pressure — it’s not just a casual conversation. When [a Chinese person] asks you a question, it can shape their entire view of the United States.”

This type of “free diplomacy” was once commonplace. The number of Americans doing study abroad programs in China peaked at nearly 15,000 in 2011, before plummeting to 211 during the pandemic, when visa restrictions and rippling covid lockdowns made it hard for foreigners to enter the country.

Since China’s reopening, the numbers slowly rebounded to about 880 in 2024, according to former U.S. ambassador to China Nicholas Burns.

Now, amid a painful trade war and the Trump administration's crackdown on Chinese student visas, students and U.S.-China experts fear the decrease in educational exchanges may further strain the relationship between the superpowers and diminish China expertise at a time when it is needed more than ever.

“The U.S. and China are probably the two most important geopolitical powers, so it behooves us to know about China at all levels and to have Americans here,” said David Moser, who teaches at a university in China and has been involved in several educational programs for Americans in China.

“It’s really important that we train each new generation of ‘China hands,’ who understand China and who are willing to dedicate their careers to China,” Moser said. “Those people are very valuable, especially at times of crisis, which are looming ahead.”

There are several popular routes for Americans to study in China, including short-term study abroad programs, graduate degrees or at joint institutions such as NYU Shanghai and Duke Kunshan.

But the combination of the pandemic and geopolitical frictions is sapping American interest in studying in China and reducing available paths to do so.

The House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party released a report in September saying U.S. universities’ partnerships with Chinese universities may be helping Beijing’s military development drive. In the aftermath of the committee’s investigation, several U.S. universities — including the University of Michigan and Georgia Tech — cut ties with Chinese partners. Harvard University had previously, in 2022, moved its summer language program from Beijing to Taiwan.

In Trump’s first term, the administration suspended the government’s Fulbright program in China and Hong Kong, which provided teaching or research fellowships, and in 2020 the Peace Corps said it would shut down its program in China after 27 years of operation.

“When these programs shut down, I think we’re shutting down an important avenue for understanding the place,” said Daniel Murphy, a China expert and executive director of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government.

National security concerns should be carefully investigated, he added. But “if we have so few Americans on the ground in China and we sharply curtail the number of Chinese students in the United States, are we cutting off those vital channels of communication and increasing the risk of miscalculation?”

Most American students in China say they rarely, if ever, experience anti-American sentiment in China, and Beijing seems at least outwardly welcoming to them: Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced a goal in 2023 to attract 50,000 American students to China over five years.

But there are still plenty of cultural differences for Americans to get used to, ranging from the trivial — spicy food and different social media apps, like WeChat — to the serious.

Some students say they have experienced culture shock in the classroom, where the teaching style is more oriented toward dry lectures than discussions. Others describe growing accustomed to ubiquitous digital and physical surveillance, and the blurry red lines of what politically sensitive topics can and can't be discussed.

For St.Denis, who runs a TikTok account called "Dear China" to help American viewers better understand China and occasionally contributes to Chinese state media, figuring out these red lines is part of the point of studying in China. "What can I say? When can I say this?" she asked.

Other American students, however, chafe at the censorship.

Avery Prewitt, another graduate student at Tsinghua, said her academic adviser suggested she change elements of her thesis — which explored Japanese atrocities against China in the Nanjing Massacre during World War II — and she deliberately self-censors in daily life to not "welcome the trouble."

Prewitt, who is from Colorado, is frustrated when she is asked to be a delegate for her country — an increasingly difficult task as tensions rise. "When I tell somebody I'm from Meiguo, it's not the same reaction I got two years ago of excitement," she said, using the Chinese term for America. "It immediately stops the conversation."

She said she often wakes up to messages in WeChat groups where classmates, both Chinese and international, post about the U.S. news and tag her.

"I feel like I need to explain, defend or even apologize for things far beyond my control," she said. "They go to you because you're their connection [to the U.S.], but when there's so few of us, it does feel like a lot."

Many American students in China bemoaned the Trump administration's announcement last month that the U.S. will crack down on visas for Chinese students, including for those with connections to the Chinese Communist Party.

Harry Rubin, on a graduate fellowship at Peking University's Yenching Academy, said that his Chinese classmates have helped him understand more about party membership.

"For most students who join, it's not because they believe in Marxism, Leninism," he said. "No, it's because they want to have it on their résumé if they ever want to work at a state-owned enterprise."

Rubin added this is the type of context he is learning in Beijing, one he says U.S. decision-makers need to craft China policy.

“It’s very important that there are enough people that know what’s going on here,” he said.

Alexandra Yarashevich, a graduate student at the Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University Center in Jiangsu province, said she has a courtside view of the most important geopolitical relationship today.

“There’s a lot of conversation going on” between the U.S. and China, she said. “And as an American in China, I’m also in the middle of that conversation, but I get to see it from a different perspective, and I think that’s very rewarding.”

After graduating in China, some students hope to stay. One American student, who just graduated from NYU Shanghai and who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive geopolitical issues in China, said that the small number of Americans in China actually has a silver lining.

“I recognize that as one of few young Americans on the ground here, the opportunities for me are nearly unlimited,” he said, adding that he is now setting up a consultancy to help American businesses operate in China.

But many students say the barriers remain far too high to stay after graduation, unlike previous generations of American students, who set up careers in business, academia or journalism in China. Those barriers, students say, include an opaque visa process, a more oppressive political environment, and a tight job market due to a struggling Chinese economy.

For some students who hope to return home to work for the U.S. government, their experience in China may even be a hindrance.

Prewitt said that she initially wanted to parlay her China expertise into work on U.S.-China relations at the State Department after graduation, but she has been advised that security clearance processes — required for many government jobs — are much more difficult now for applicants with extended experience in China.

Murphy, from Harvard, said that he hears security clearance concerns a lot from students considering living in China and that he is worried about the implications of this shift.

“I would like to think that in the U.S. government, we value experience on the ground in China,” he said. “This would seem shortsighted to exclude people from government service because they have lived experience in China.”

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a range of perspectives on the impact of reduced educational exchanges between the U.S. and China. Some commenters emphasize the importance of maintaining educational

exchanges to foster understanding and prevent conflict, while others express skepticism... [Show more](#)

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