

Extremist Tendencies

There is a Chinese proverb, 过犹不及, “Going too far is as bad as not going far enough,” which aptly describes the visa situation enforced by the current U.S. administration, especially with regard to scientific exchange.

An increasing number of Chinese scientists and students are encountering delays and refusals when applying for visas to go to the United States. Most of them are bona fide students who intend to study in the United States or scientists who plan to participate in scientific conferences or collaborations with U.S. colleagues. It is now very costly with respect to both time and money to go through the visa application process. The result is lost opportunities to present new research at important international conferences or to participate in scientific collaborations. This situation even affects some of the most prominent scientists in China, such as the vice president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and the director of the Shanghai Institutes of Biological Sciences, CAS.

For this Editorial, we sent a simple e-mail survey to about 400 Chinese professors and graduate students at CAS and the Universities of Peking, Fudan, Yunnan, and Wuhan. We received 76 replies within 2 weeks. 71% of respondents said that they would avoid going to the United States; 91% are seriously rethinking their collaborations with U.S. scientists and intend to work with scientists in countries where obtaining a visa is not a problem; and 95% believe that the visa situation is damaging to Sino-U.S. scientific exchange. Both authors have had outstanding graduate students who abandoned plans to go to the United States after experiencing tremendous frustration with the visa process, taking up postdoctoral positions in Europe or Canada instead.

China produces a lot of talent simply because of the size of its population. Tens of thousands of Chinese students have gone to study in the United States, attracted by the excellent scientific environment and the opportunity to develop a successful career. Many remain in the United States; they have established their labs, excelled in their research, and most of them maintain extensive connections with the scientific community in China. On the other hand, an increasing number of Chinese students trained in the United States have returned to China to start their own labs, and most of them maintain extensive connections with the U.S. scientific community. As of 17 September 2004, 53% of the research papers published in *Science* and *Nature* this year that are from Chinese laboratories are coauthored with American scientists. This degree of Sino-U.S. collaboration is important for both Chinese and U.S. science, but it is being damaged by the current problems with the U.S. visa process. Scientists in other countries are also experiencing similar frustrations in obtaining U.S. visas.

Fencing the United States off from the rest of the world is a backward step. Communication, exchange, and international collaboration are essential for high-quality scientific research. One reason why the United States maintains preeminence in scientific research is that it attracts talent from, and keeps a close connection with, scientific institutions all over the world. Ironically, overreaction to terrorism to the degree that every aspect of normal life is disrupted is exactly the result the terrorists aimed to achieve. We sincerely hope that unnecessary barriers between U.S. and international scientific communities can be removed and that healthy collaboration and exchange can be encouraged. This is in the interest of every country, including the United States.

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