

Said one adviser who spoke on con-
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Chinese students flock to U.S., rarely return

BY MICHAEL DORGAN
Mercury News Beijing Bureau

BELJING — Yang Zhen, one of tens of thousands of Chinese who are hoping to win admission to a U.S. university this spring, insists that he'll return home after he graduates.

"I am the only child in my family," said the earnest 25-year-old, who hopes to study business administration or international relations.

If Yang does return to China, he'll be one of a tiny minority. China sends more students to the United States than any other country — more than 50,000 last year. And although all of them assure U.S. State Department visa officers here that they'll go home after they finish school, as many as 90 percent look for jobs in America instead.

Some qualify for special visas for high-tech fields. Some marry Americans. Some simply disappear.

"Once they're in the U.S., they're pretty much free to do what they want to do," concedes Charles Bennett, the chief of visa services at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing.

The impact of China's massive and unofficial immigration on the United States depends on one's

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Flow of Chinese studen

Despite promises to return, many stay to find work

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point of view. For high-tech companies, it's a boon. For colleges and universities, it's a source of world-class scholars. For other applicants, particularly to top graduate science programs, it means tougher competition.

For China, the defection of top scholars to U.S. schools and employers is a worrisome brain drain.

"It's well-known in the society that the first-class students go abroad," said a professor at the International and Comparative Education Institute of Beijing Normal University, speaking on the condition that he not be identified. "The second-class students go to joint ventures (in China, with foreign companies), and the worst students go to the state-owned enterprises," he said. "It's a big loss to the country."

Financial allure

Luring the brainpower home won't be easy. Enhanced personal freedom aside, the economic argument for staying in the United States is compelling. Top pay for a senior engineer at China's largest software company is 80,000 yuan a year, or about \$9,780. The same engineer can make 10 times that in Silicon Valley.

While it is possible to live more cheaply in Beijing, China's cost of living approaches California's when the comparison entails a Western-style basket of goods and services, according to figures provided by HR International, a human resources consulting firm based in Waltham, Mass.

Bottom line: The return rate for Chinese students in the United States is so low it that could be used as an argument for reducing the number of visas granted, said a former U.S. visa official in Beijing who asked not to be identified.

She noted that the nearly 50-year-old law guiding the U.S. visa policy says non-immigration visas should not be granted if the interviewing officer suspects the applicant does not intend to return to the home country.

"An honest evaluation would virtually end visa issuance (to Chinese applicants)," she said.

So keen are Chinese students to get into U.S. schools — or at least the United States — that a cottage industry has sprung up to help them.

Special schools prepare students to meet the English language requirements. Consul-



Chinese applicants wait in line in January to be interviewed to obtain U.S. visas at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing.

tants help fill out applications to universities and prepare candidates for their interviews with U.S. Embassy visa officers.

"We can provide service to all types of people, from (prep school students) to graduate students who want to study in America," said Lucy Liu of the Weilian International Co. in Beijing. "There are lots of U.S. schools that have relations with our company. The charge ... will range from 10,000 yuan to 70,000 (\$1,200 to \$8,500), depending on the type of service you need."

Costly preparations

For fees of up to \$10,000, some consultants will create phony letters of recommendation and false evidence of economic support. Some even provide professional actors to stand in for applicants in their brief but crucial interviews with visa officers, said William Lesh, an anti-fraud officer at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing.

Once in the United States, some Chinese visitors may be undertaking another kind of

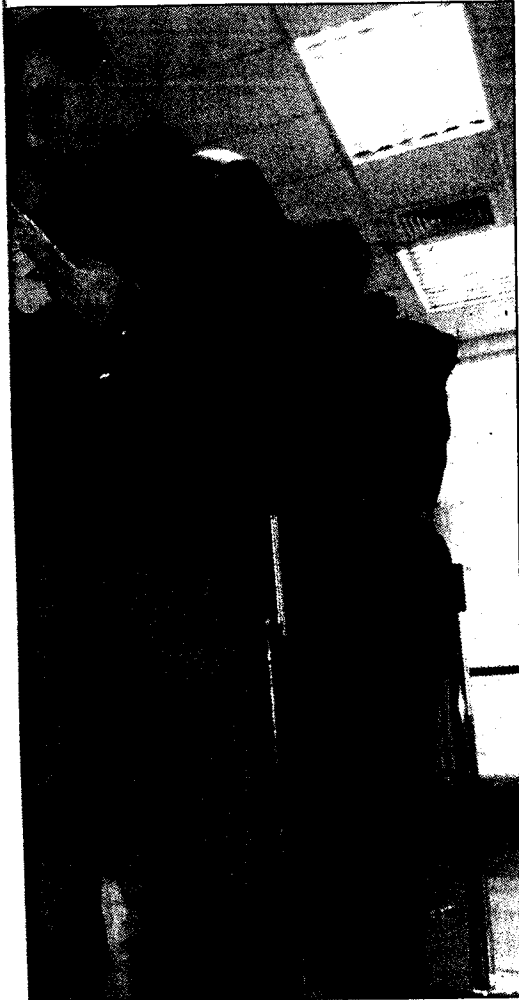
fraud. U.S. counterintelligence officials say some Chinese students, especially in physics, computer science and other high-tech disciplines, are actually Chinese spies, and that some real students are ordered to report what they learn about U.S. high-tech research to the Chinese government.

A commission on Chinese espionage chaired by Rep. Christopher Cox, R-Newport Beach, reached a similar conclusion last May. A headline in the third unclassified chapter of the commission's 872-page report noted that "(Chinese) Students Have U.S. Citizen-Like Access to High-Performance Computers at the National Weapons Laboratories."

Without more specifics, the report said "threats to national security can come from (Chinese) scientists, students, business people or bureaucrats" in addition to professional spies.

Despite these suspected side effects and strained U.S.-Chinese relations, the flow of Chinese students to the United States — many related to senior government and party officials — appears to be increasing.

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MIMI KUO — KNIGHT RIDDER

U.S. Embassy in Beijing.

During the past academic year, 51,001 Chinese nationals studied in the United States, according to the Institute of International Education, a New York non-profit. That was nearly 5,000 more students than second-place Japan, until recently the largest source of foreign students in the United States. Chinese represented about 10 percent of the total U.S. foreign student population of 490,933.

Three-quarters were graduate students; 12 percent undergraduates. The rest were non-degree students or students of English.

More than 99 percent remain here

A U.S. immigration official in Beijing, speaking on the condition that he not be identified, said experience shows that more than 99 percent of Chinese students remain in the United States after graduating.

Even Yang Zhen wouldn't return immediately. "I don't pretend I don't have plans to work awhile in the U.S.," he said over a cup of coffee at a downtown Starbucks.

Yang, a top student in the 1997 class of the

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respected Beijing Foreign Studies University, is optimistic as he awaits the outcome of admission and aid negotiations with, among others, Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and the University of Miami.

He picked them from friends' recommendations and the annual rankings by U.S. News & World Report.

"We know that the United States has lots of famous schools and that we can get a world-class education, especially at the graduate level," Yang said in impeccable English, his undergraduate major.

Yang's parents are reluctant to part with their only child. But as they sipped tea one recent evening in a modest south Beijing apartment both endorsed their son's decision.

"I think an MBA (a master's degree in business administration) would probably be best," said his mother, Pan Lili, whose own education was cut short by the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution, when China's universities were closed.

Life-changing process

The drama of the student visa quest is played out each working day at the U.S. Embassy by a cast of hundreds. The stage is the spartan room where supplicants, dozens at a time, line up for two- to three-minute individual interviews that will set the course of their lives.

Outside, a dozen or so travel agents wait with offers of cheap airplane tickets for anyone who emerges with a smile. Most visa-seekers, however, emerge crushed.

Because visa officers conduct as many as 200 interviews per day, they have no time to verify documents or confirm stories. The likeliest to get the nod, according to one former visa officer, are top scholars from well-known Chinese universities who've been accepted, with financial aid, by well-known U.S. schools.

"It's a wrenching, emotionally racking experience for both sides," she said. "The visa officers must steel themselves to try to follow the law, and the applicants sometimes end up screaming that they've ruined their lives."

"One man fainted on me," she recalled. "I thought he was dead, that I had killed him. I rushed to his side, shouting, 'Are you all right? Are you all right?'"

"He opened his eyes and said, 'Yes. Now can I have my visa?'"