

Is Studying Overseas Losing Its Allure for Chinese Students?

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JIANGSU, EAST CHINA – Nanjing, a city 300 kilometers away from Shanghai, has been only mildly affected by China’s recent Omicron outbreak: high schools resumed in-person classes on April 7, two days after the city reached zero COVID.

Two years ago, when the epidemic started in central China’s Hubei province, Nan Zhaojin was in the middle of her first year in the international department of a local school, where she took classes in English to prepare to apply for universities overseas. But as the virus spread around the world, her family urged her to rethink her plans.

“We’ve found a school for you to attend,” Nan was told by her grandparents. “You could try to keep up with the 10th graders there; if not, start high school afresh.” Older members of her family insisted that it would be safer to stay in the country.

It was a difficult decision. At 15, she had already made big commitments to going overseas. China’s college entrance exam, the *gaokao*, is one of the world’s most competitive, and high school students frequently spend six days a week for three years to prepare. Nan’s international program, taught mostly in English and targeting the American college admissions process, would make her ineligible to take the test, and inadequately prepared. Changing tracks would mean going back to the beginning of high school and starting again.

Whenever there was a shooting, like what happened in a New York subway station recently and the Chinese student killed in Chicago, my parents would send me the news.

Despite the costs, two of her classmates dropped out of the international program that year, starting again at public high schools.

One told Nan he was losing confidence in overseas study. “He said his options would be limited, judging from the COVID-19 situation in 2020,” Nan recalled.

“He also told me he couldn’t get used to teaching in English. So he went back to a public school in his hometown, another city in Jiangsu,” she added. “We haven’t talked since. Now he’s probably preparing for this year’s *gaokao*.”

Many Chinese students have either pushed off or canceled plans to study abroad since the start of the pandemic, citing fears of COVID-19, the difficulty of visiting home, and fear of crime and anti-Asian discrimination overseas.

Fortune magazine reported an 18% decline in the number of Chinese students' applications for US universities for the 2022 academic year, compared with 2021. The US Student and Exchange Visitor Program issued a report in April, saying there were 348,992 Chinese students in the United States last year, 33,569 fewer than 2020.



A promotional event for Harrow School's Hainan branch in Haikou, Hainan province, 2019. Xu Ersheng/VCG

The number of Chinese students in the UK, the number two destination for outbound students, recovered to 119,334 in 2021, just below the 2019 level of 119,825, following a dramatic 32% plunge in 2020, according to data from the country's immigration office.

Canada, the third most popular destination, has seen its Chinese student population fall by 25%, from over 140,000 in 2019 to 105,000 in 2021.

China has not reported a total number of outbound students since the start of the pandemic. The report "Studying Abroad Guideline 2022" issued by China's Ministry of Education recommends that students apply for multiple programs in more than one country and be prepared for remote learning. The guideline also points to international politics and visa policies as factors affecting students' choices.

A Nanjing-based counselor said some students are reconsidering plans to study abroad, in part because of the tense relationship between China and the US. “This is a trend we’ve observed, especially among those who are graduating this year and next year,” Zhong Jue, who works for an agency in Nanjing offering consultancy on studying abroad, told Sixth Tone.

Zhong shared the example of a reputable high school in Nanjing, saying the annual number of students going abroad to study was around 220 pre-pandemic. “But they’re having 200 this year, and only 145 next year.”

If she switched back to the *gaokao* track, Nan could still apply to go abroad; but if she stayed in the international program she couldn’t take the *gaokao*. These students studying the Chinese curriculum can also apply for overseas universities if they manage to prepare for the necessary exams and portfolio required. However, the *gaokao* is not an option for students who choose international curriculums for their high school years.

The then 15-year-old Nan seriously reconsidered her plan to study abroad.

“It wasn’t an easy decision to make when I was stuck at home taking online courses surrounded by the voices of ‘just go back and sit the *gaokao*, we have it all planned out for you’ from my grandparents and other relatives,” Nan said. “For a while, I was swayed.”

But Nan’s friends told her to be cautious unless she’s sure about handling all the pressures of walking the two paths: in addition to completing the three-year public school curriculum for the *gaokao* and preparing for American exams in her free time, she’d also have to participate in extracurricular activities to do well in her overseas applications.

Nan had had a hard enough time preparing for her high school entrance examination, the *zhongkao*, even more competitive than the *gaokao* with a 50% fail rate. “I know in the US, the education system values overall development more than just academic performances,” she said. Nan spent a year attending classes in the US when she was 10 years old.

Ultimately, she decided to stick with her plans.

I’ll be fine if I stay on campus, or I’ll hand over all my money immediately whenever I get robbed.

“Moreover, I have already studied the international curriculum for a whole semester and prepared for the TOEFL language proficiency test. I don’t want to start all over again for the *gaokao*. It’s a whole different curriculum that requires another three years of tough preparation,” Nan said. “My mom supported my decision. She knew I didn’t handle the pressure from *zhongkao* well and she’s worried I won’t be able to survive the *gaokao*,” she added.

“*Gaokao*, this one exam, defines your future.” Nan said. “Unlike TOEFL or SAT that you can take till you get a satisfactory grade, you only have one shot in the *gaokao*. Looking back, while my peers spent their days in textbooks and doing endless exercises and exams,

I've learned a lot through the activities I did to impress overseas schools." It is possible to retake the *gaokao*, but the test is offered only once a year, and there are some restrictions for retakers.

Nan was accepted to Washington University in St. Louis, and plans to begin school in person in the fall.



High school seniors study in a classroom in Shenyang, Liaoning province, May 18, 2022.
Yu Haiyang/CNS/IC

Others have changed their plans. Gong Zilu is another Nanjing student on the international track. She was planning to study in the US before the pandemic, but has pivoted to universities in Hong Kong, which also do not require the *gaokao*.

"My family wanted me to stay close due to COVID-19 and safety," Gong, in her last year of high school, told Sixth Tone. "Whenever there was a shooting, like what happened in a New York subway station recently and the Chinese student killed in Chicago, my parents would send me the news and tell me that it would keep them awake all night if I were there."

Gong has several friends who went abroad for K-12 education at a younger age. Some of them have been stuck abroad for more than two years, since coming home requires at least 14 days of self-paid centralized quarantine and seven days of home quarantine, not to mention sky-high prices for airline tickets.

"I can't imagine not being able to return home for so long," Gong said. "Hong Kong is much closer and I won't need to deal with many cultural differences."

He Jiaying, a 12th-grader in a Nanjing public school domestic track, spent 2020 agonizing over whether to apply for overseas schools or focus on the *gaokao*.

When He started 11th grade at school after a semester of online classes, she was struggling between the two choices. “I was actually planning to go abroad but every now and then I regretted it and thought about taking the *gaokao*,” she said. “I was just very unsure about myself, my strength, and what I wanted to do.”

Back at school, He found that her fellow students were feeling similar anxieties. “Some top students, who had been planning their lives around applying for an Ivy League school, seemed less motivated than before.”

She said her classmates’ interest in studying abroad has been dwindling since the start of the pandemic. “We all seemed to be less active, less sure, as if we were being pushed forward. We felt that the path we had chosen was not as good as we thought, but we had no other choice but to walk it.”

As He considered her options in 2020, she also worried about paying Ivy League tuition for online classes, and having to attend remote classes late at night in China’s time zone. “I attended an online summer school for a month last year. It was an awful experience. But with the improving COVID-19 situation, I don’t think my university life will be affected as much as in 2020,” she told Sixth Tone.

He applied for schools in the US, and was admitted in December 2021.

He says studying abroad would be a chance to leave her comfort zone and start to explore. “I’ll pick up life skills and learn to take care of myself when my parents are not around,” she said.

Her parents are divided: while her father is supportive, her mother prefers her daughter to stay in China, primarily because of the pandemic and security concerns.

“The university I’m going to study with is in a neighborhood with a relatively high crime rate. It cannot compare with China’s level of security. But the school will send out alarm emails. I’ll be fine if I stay on campus, or I’ll hand over all my money immediately whenever I get robbed,” she said with a mischievous smile.

She plans to study psychology and brain sciences, and says she made the decision mainly because of the strength of the school’s program. “The overall strength and the flexibility to choose courses is the best at this US university, though I did apply for other schools in Canada and the UK,” she added.

Dane Christiansen, a Beijing-based overseas college advisor, said international classes are getting smaller in the school he works at. “This new year the number of students looking to study in the international department specifically has shrunk again,” he told Sixth Tone, declining to name the school.

Last year, the school sent about 370 graduating students to study abroad. “This year, it’s down to 300. In the class after, it is 270. Then the grade 10 classes only have 230 students.”

In addition to worries over COVID-19, Christiansen said Chinese parents’ top concern remains safety. News about attacks on Asians in the US has intensified longstanding worries about crime. “They’ll do more research on the city’s security and less on the rankings,” he said.



The graduation ceremony of the international division of a high school in Zhengzhou, Henan province, 2018. VCG

He Enxing, who is not related to He Jiaying, is another Nanjing student in her final year of high school. Like Nan, she has been admitted to Washington University. Her parents’ concern over her safety is alleviated by the fact that their daughter is going to study at the school this fall with 13 other fellow students from Nanjing, who can take care of each other.

Her father works in Shanghai and has been stuck in the city for around two months because of the Omicron outbreak. He supported his daughter’s decision, and told her that by the time she goes to the US, COVID-19 will no longer be lethal, and life will get back to normal.

“I don’t regret my choice. Living with COVID-19 is inevitable, or else it would jeopardize my future,” He told Sixth Tone.

To He, the pandemic is not the worst threat to her safety and well-being in the US — the hate against Asians and discrimination are. “Nearly all the students there have been COVID-positive at least once, and they are just fine. But there are other issues we will have to face,” she said.

“I’ve seen a lot of news about shootings and racial discrimination. China-US tensions and the political rivalry restrain us from accepting one another. We are not sure about how we will be treated in the US,” said He, who plans to study political science and sociology.

While countries in North America and Europe were the most popular destinations for Chinese international students in the past, the trend is subtly changing: not just because of COVID-19, but also the fewer cultural shocks and biases in neighboring countries.

Statistics in the “[Annual Report](#) on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (2020-2021)” issued by the Center for China & Globalization, released in March 2021, showed that the proportion of international students choosing to go to Japan and Singapore increased year-on-year by 4.54% and 3.84% respectively.

Christiansen has also observed this trend, saying his students have started to diversify their application prospects because of both pandemic and geopolitics. “Before, students made up their minds pretty early about going to the UK, US, or Canada, but now they are applying to Hong Kong and Singapore,” he said. “There is a greater selection in their choices initially because of skepticism over COVID-19 and what is happening.”



A mother readings marketing materials of an international school in Beijing, 2018. VCG

The pandemic has reinforced an older trend of confidence in domestic universities. A growing number of students are making Chinese schools their first choice.

Zhang Yuxuan, an eighth grader in Zhengzhou, central China's Henan province, is the kind of student who would have an easy time getting into a top US school. She started to pick up English at the age of 4 and is now an active English debater who has won several national tournaments.

A debate champion with outstanding academic performances and impressive extracurriculars is traditionally considered a competitive candidate for an overseas university. But Zhang is hoping to take the *gaokao* and go to Tsinghua University.

Zhang said she never really considered going overseas.

"My parents suggested it would be safer for me to attend a domestic university," Zhang told Sixth Tone. She enjoys her life at Chinese schools, including the uniforms and regulation of short hair.

"Education abroad might be overrated to some extent. People base their judgment on their imagination and form ideas about overseas schools from the internet," she said. "But when they actually go, they might have a hard time fitting in. Perhaps a domestic school is better for a lot of us."

While many 12th graders in China are still preparing for this year's *gaokao*, which is arranged for June (but has been postponed to July in Shanghai due to the pandemic), students going abroad have received offers and made their decisions by May 1.

There are less than three months left before Nan's departure, and her parents are busy preparing her. As the only child in the family, she's nagged and pestered by pre-departure talks from her parents and other family members. And her parents have sent her to a Brazilian jiu-jitsu class.

"My major was not decided when I applied for the school. I wish to explore where my passion is through various courses and activities," Nan said. "Life there could be very different from home. Though it could take me a while before I get accustomed to it, I am still looking forward to experiencing some new culture."

Editor: David Cohen.

(Header image: A student talks to international high school program staff at an education fair in Beijing, 2021. Li He/VCG)

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