

*Chinese Students
Encounter America*

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The Road to Studying Abroad

THE STIRRING POLICY OF PERMITTING PERSONALLY ARRANGED OVERSEAS STUDIES

When the news of the first wave of students going to America appeared in newspapers near the end of 1978, few Chinese grasped its historical significance and its far-reaching impact on their lives. At that time, the thought of studying abroad was outside their consciousness. A country overseas, as far from China as heaven and hell, was irrelevant.

When I first heard the news, I paid little attention to it. I was then in a small, remote city in China's southwest. Daily, public loudspeakers broadcast songs such as "The Embroidered Golden Banner," "The Hills and Waters of Jiao County," and "Horse, Tread Slowly."

Most youth then were preoccupied with finding a city job, struggling to prepare for their college entrance examination, or shedding tears for Liu Xinwu's novel *Love's Status*. Nobody was concerned about studying abroad.

At that time a few people began to leave.

At first, all students were chosen by the government, and nearly all were also financed by the government. Most went as visiting scholars and only a few as graduate or undergraduate students. For most visiting scholars, being selected to go abroad was similar to other events in their lives that were arranged by their work units. Many were selected

because they had high scores, especially in a foreign language, on their entrance examinations for colleges or graduate schools.

The process left little room for individual choice, as people were accustomed to “submitting to the Party’s arrangements in all things.” A thirty-year-old student who returned from Tokyo University with a Ph.D. said that he did not really expect to study abroad when he took the graduate study examination. But there was a quota of two people in his field, and he did well in the examination, especially in English. In addition, on the application form he put a checkmark on the question “Are you taking the examination for studying abroad?” He was sent to Dalian Foreign Language School to study Japanese and later was sent to Japan. When he returned, his fluent American English had been replaced by fluent Japanese.

In the early eighties, news of students being sent abroad began to appear more and more frequently in the media. Still, few people dreamed of going abroad; that opportunity was available to only a few well-known scientists and high achievers in prestigious colleges.

What stirred society and excited the people was the policy of permitting students with private financial means to study abroad. On January 14, 1981, the Office of the Premier approved a plan drafted by the Ministry of Education and six other ministries in their “Request for Instruction Regarding Studying Abroad with Private Financial Means”¹ and issued the “Interim Regulations on Studying Abroad with Private Financial Means.” This was the boldest step taken by the Chinese government in its opening-up policy.

An unverified report stated that some privately financed students were among the first group of students that went to America in 1978.² In 1979 the U.S. Embassy in China issued 523 F-1 visas.³ The Chinese ministries also acknowledged in their drafted request that “the number of students applying for studying abroad with private financial means increased markedly since last year.” According to *China Education Almanac*, there were between three thousand and four thousand such applicants in 1980 alone.⁴ Nevertheless, before 1981, obtaining permission to study abroad with private financial means required making frequent trips to Beijing to solicit help from government leaders.

The policy of permitting overseas study with private financial means opened the “front door” for everyone. Many youths discovered that for the first time in their life they could dream of studying abroad and could work toward the realization of that dream.

One day, before the "Interim Regulations" were announced, a neighbor came to my house. She was the mother of a five-year-old and had been recently transferred to Beijing from a petroleum refinery in nearby Fangshan. She asked loudly as soon as she walked in, "Why aren't you applying for studying abroad? Lots of people have."

"How do you apply?" I was totally unenlightened then.

"You must initiate contact with foreign universities!"

"What do you mean? Besides, I don't have the money to pay the tuition."

"Maybe they'll give you a scholarship."

At that time, those words were like passages from Tales of the Arabian Nights. How could anybody study abroad without going through the Ministry of Education?

She left after some chatting. I have not seen her since, nor do I know if she has gone abroad. But I did hear that she had borrowed an English typewriter from a friend and started teaching her five-year-old to type. She showed uncanny foresight.

Later events proved my neighbor was right.

Most people probably felt somewhat envious upon reading that others were leaving for advanced studies overseas but did not give it another thought. Then their parents would tell them that the son of a colleague or the daughter of a neighbor living five blocks away was going to America to study. Some began to wonder, "Really?" Then the news would come that a college classmate in another department or a friend in a higher class of the same department was leaving for New York or Paris. They could not help wondering, now with a pang of jealousy, "How did he do it? Does he have an uncle there?" Then one day, a classmate or best friend would break the news: "I'll be leaving the day after tomorrow." They would be stunned. Then suddenly they would have a rude awakening: "If they can do it, why can't I?"

Understanding the issue of studying abroad was like understanding the revolution as expounded by Mr. Sun Yat-sen: there were those who understood it quickly, those who understood slowly, and those who would never understand.

A twenty-eight-year-old graduate student at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, recalled that she had never considered studying abroad; the opportunity simply was thrust on her.

She and her boyfriend graduated from a prestigious college in Beijing. They began dating their junior year. She recalled their busy college life with nostalgia: classes, examinations, seminars, sports, partying. The even busier life while they

dated made them dizzy. In 1985, after finishing graduate school, they were assigned to the same research institute. They rode bicycles side by side to and from work. The work at the institute was neither leisurely nor busy; there was always time available for chatting or sneaking away to do some shopping. They began to plan their wedding. Should the wedding banquet be held at the Beijing Hotel or the Imperial Kitchen in Beihai Park? Should they go to Huangshan or Hangzhou for their honeymoon?

In their junior year, two of their classmates, who were both student cadres of the Chinese Communist Party, had been sent abroad by the government. While having a high opinion of the event, they paid little attention. But by the time of their graduation, about one-third of the class of thirty had left China. A year later only five or six classmates remained, and they were trying feverishly to go abroad.

The woman could no longer sit still. One day, she said, "I want to go abroad." Her mother responded, "How can you do it?"

Her boyfriend neither supported her nor objected: "Go ahead and give it a try. If you succeed, you can do some exploration for me, too."

So she started reviewing her English. Six months later she passed the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and soon afterward she passed the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) with a high score.

A year later the couple separately received letters of admission from two American universities. About a month before the June Fourth Incident, they boarded the same plane for America.

On the day of their departure, only one person in their class remained in China, forever; he was diagnosed with leukemia and died soon after he took the TOEFL.

Reflecting on the past, she said thoughtfully that it was fortunate that she decided to go to America. Perhaps because they had left China, she and her boyfriend parted ways two years later. But she had no strong regrets.

With an ever-increasing awareness of the opportunity, going abroad to study started like a ripple in a pond and grew to be a wave in an ocean. In 1983 there were only about one thousand privately financed students. In 1986 the number exceeded ten thousand. In 1987 it broke one hundred thousand.⁵ Suddenly, male and female, old and young, with or without a foreign connection or a yearning for more education, were all seriously considering studying abroad.

If the generation of the Cultural Revolution was hardened by one "movement" after another, the subsequent generation grew to maturity in an environment of one "craze" after another. First there was the literature craze. This was followed by the politics craze, the business craze,

the campaign craze, the aesthetics craze, the culture craze, the petition craze. . . . One fad waxed while another waned. The studying-abroad craze, however, persisted unabated. To China's youth, studying abroad was a challenge filled with adventure, a search for personal values, and an opportunity that could change one's life.

Chinese society at that time left little room for the younger generation to grow. There were no motivating agendas in politics, no wealth to seek, no battlefield for the spirit to roam, and also no private life that was worth defending against outside intrusion. To survive, people simply sat and waited. For what, nobody had a clue.

Greetings between the young always included these two sentences:

"How are you?"

"Down in the dumps."

Thus, going abroad became a big event in a life that was otherwise ordinary, languid, and colorless. The yearning might eventually turn from a sweet dream to a nightmare,⁶ but doubtless it had brought boundless hope and a lust for life to China's youth by giving them the freedom to choose their own path.

The motivation for studying abroad varied. Some students went because they had lofty aspirations or sought an opportunity for their talent; others left for higher pay or to escape an unsatisfying marriage. Going abroad meant different things to different people. Some did it to earn honor for their country or to pursue personal growth, wealth, or freedom of speech. Some left simply to bear another child. But regardless of what one sought, the best approach was always going abroad. Even when one had no goals, the process was worthwhile in itself. A friend, unwilling to drift, said to me with deep feeling, "No matter how you look at it, going abroad is at least *something*."

Once the decision was made, life changed abruptly from lethargy to tension, from boredom to excitement. There was no time to worry about the destiny of the country or one's fellow countrymen, to criticize the government, to verbalize endless grievances, to complain about the boss. The year-end bonus, the promotion, and colleagues' appraisals were no longer fussed over. One rose to the occasion, far above daily pettiness.

In the eighties, when two acquaintances met on a Beijing street, the most frequent dialogue was these two sentences:

"Hey, how goes it with your study-abroad project?"

"It's in progress!"

ENGLISH AS A WEAPON FOR SURVIVAL

The journey toward studying abroad was like the Long March.⁷ There were turbulent waters, snowy mountains, and grasslands that had to be crossed. At times one was surrounded, hunted, cornered, intercepted. Some fell, some straggled behind, some gave up. Only the few people with a strong will unintimidated by the prospect of failure could reach their destination.

The first step of this long march was to study a foreign language.

"Foreign language is a weapon in life's struggle," wrote Karl Marx. People learned that maxim during the Cultural Revolution, but they probably understood its profound significance only in the late eighties.

All foreign language teaching was halted during the Cultural Revolution and was resumed only in its final days to fit China's political agenda. I was taught English in elementary school because of anti-imperialism, Russian in junior high because of anti-revisionism, and finally English again in high school. To this day I can recite the two English sentences that I learned in elementary school, but have not yet found an occasion for their use: "Chairman Mao is our Red commander" and "We are his little Red Guards."

In the early opening-up period in the eighties, students' proficiency in English was poor, as illustrated by the well-known campus anecdote about the girl leaving the cafeteria after dinner who pushed open the door, which struck the head of an incoming boy. Eager to practice her spoken English and to apologize, she said, "Thank you," leaving the confounded boy massaging the bump on his head. During English examinations for studying abroad, while the minutes and seconds were ticking toward zero hour, people outside the test room would tightly clasp their copies of *Learn with Broadcasting English* to hone their proficiency. In every social stratum and every corner of the country, the zeal for learning a foreign language rose spectacularly among the young. A colleague of mine said, "Don't use up all your energy at work—save some for expanding your English vocabulary at home."

China's market economy quickly responded to the study-abroad craze. Foreign-language dictionaries became and remained best sellers. *The New English-Chinese Dictionary* and *The English-Chinese Dual Explanation Dictionary* had numerous reprintings. New teaching material also appeared in the market. First there were *Lingaphone* and *Essential*; then there were *New Concepts* and *Learn with Me*; these were followed

by guidebooks such as *A Brief Introduction to Foreign Institutions Accepting [Chinese] Students*, and *A Guidebook for Studying Abroad*.

The most spectacular sight in this cultural whirlwind was the mushrooming of continuing-education schools teaching foreign languages. On any given day in 1989, the *Beijing Evening News* (Beijing wanbao) would carry numerous advertisements such as the following:

Foreign Language School Accepting Applicants

Foreign teachers, computer facilities. TOEFL, GRE, career training, American dialogue, advanced English, business English, Xu Guozhang's *English, New Concept*. Teacher well-traveled in the United States. Beginners, intermediate, accelerated, full-time leave classes.⁸ Register at XX elementary school.

In April 1989, before my departure for America, I signed up for an intensive TOEFL class in a continuing-education school named Guanghua. The class was held in a high school, on Tuesdays and Thursdays from seven to nine o'clock in the evening. The semester lasted two and a half months, and the tuition was ¥150.⁹ Other concurrent classes were "Grammar Simplified," "Advanced Conversation," and "Business English." What attracted me in the advertisement was "Classes are taught by teachers with American M.A. degrees and by American citizens."

After completing a simple application and paying the fee, I was issued an attendance permit. Admission required no placement test, no letter of recommendation from one's work unit, and no review of one's political background. It was an educational system regulated by market economy alone.

Thus each Tuesday and Thursday I rode my bicycle to be drilled intensively in preparation for the TOEFL.

On the first day, there was a din of voices and a swarm of bicycles at the school. The entire administration was run by an elderly man who by day was the custodian of the high school. First he served as the school doorman, then as the bouncer, checking attendance permits from one classroom to another.

There were more than twenty students in my class. No one seemed to know anybody else, nor did anyone seem to care. Everyone appeared to be aware that, though we came from different places, we were on this journey together because we wanted to study abroad.

The teacher, a smart-looking young man, walked in. He was known

to have received a master's degree in English in America and had a day job at an international trading company. He immediately declared that he was not going to follow the textbook required by the school; that would be used for homework only. He would teach the salient points in grammar from his own notes.

Thus we set our textbooks aside and opened our notebooks. He began with some general considerations on how to study English, then discussed the special usages of articles, special forms of certain nouns, and irregular verbs. After two classes and three pages of notes, the school administrator declared that the teacher would be replaced; Mr. Huang's contract had expired and an American would replace him.

The new teacher was a young American named Bill, with blond hair and blue eyes. He looked younger than twenty and came from Michigan. Like many other American youths, after graduation he traveled around the world and earned his living by teaching English.

The new teacher, of course, had a full command of English. But he seemed unfamiliar with the TOEFL.

The first day, he sat at the teacher's desk and told the class that he was going to teach some real English. Nobody doubted his ability to do so. But it was Bill's comments about China that were more interesting. One morning, while riding a bicycle across Dongda Bridge, he saw a woman sitting on the pavement, sobbing. Many spectators surrounded her. Why were there many onlookers but not a single person who asked what the problem was and if she needed help? He said this could not possibly happen in America. If you were concerned, you would offer to help; if you weren't, you would leave.¹⁰

About a month and a half later, my intensive learning abruptly ended because of the June Fourth Incident.

Surprisingly, in early July, soon after some order returned to public places, the foreign-language continuing-education schools stubbornly returned to life. Not a single foreign news reporter noticed this earliest indication that China would remain on track with its reform and opening-up policy.

I became busily occupied with the formalities of going abroad and stopped attending the class.

The first hurdle in the journey to studying abroad is the TOEFL: "In this section of the test, you will have an opportunity to demonstrate

your ability to understand spoken English. There are three parts to this section, with special directions for each part.” I imagine that many students who are abroad now would feel nostalgic upon hearing this explanatory statement of the TOEFL. It would remind them of a distant past, like a familiar song from childhood.

Tuofu, the phonetic transliteration of TOEFL in Chinese, became a household word with a Hong Kong flavor.¹¹ The TOEFL is administered by America’s Educational Testing Service. It tests the English proficiency of foreign students whose native language is not English. American and Canadian universities frequently use TOEFL scores as one of the considerations in admitting foreign students.

In the early eighties the supply of Chinese students for the New World was quite limited, and many American colleges gave “most-favored-nation” treatment to Chinese applicants, in admission as well as scholarship awards. Generally speaking, American colleges required a TOEFL score of 500 for undergraduates and 550 for graduate students. In America, however, every business deal can be negotiated, and the TOEFL score is no exception; there is no absolute admission standard.

To standardize the study-abroad process, the Chinese government agreed to the American proposal of setting up TOEFL test centers in China. On December 11, 1981, the first TOEFL tests in China were held in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.

The number of TOEFL centers quickly expanded to eight cities, and in 1987 to fifteen cities and twenty-nine examination sites. Even this rapid expansion could not satiate the ever-growing demand.

The TOEFL test fee was \$26 in 1986; two years later it was raised to \$29. In 1996 it was between \$38 and \$45. To a Chinese whose average monthly income was only a couple hundred yuan, twenty-some dollars was a sizable sum.¹² But the cost never appeared to dampen the enthusiasm of TOEFL test-takers.

As the number of test-takers increased, matters beyond knowledge of the English language contributed to the difficulty of passing the test. In 1986 it was relatively easy to register for the TOEFL test in Beijing. But in 1988 and 1989 it became as hard as getting a ticket for a sleeping berth on a train. The would-be test-takers queued up all night, and numbers were issued and swapped. Some students organized teams to take turns in the queue. Probably the only other spectacle of comparable

magnitude was the crowd waiting outside the Shenzhen Security Exchange to buy stock.

Although it was a real struggle to register for the TOEFL test in China, the test facilities were first-rate. In Beijing the test-site colleges made available their language laboratories, and before the test, the facilities were thoroughly checked. But in America, facilities for the TOEFL were not as standardized. A student who took the TOEFL in Detroit said the examination was held in a terraced lecture hall for about a hundred test-takers. There were no earphones for the listening part; two loudspeakers that rumbled were placed on a lectern.

The rise in the number of test-takers was accompanied by a rise in scores. With a several-thousand-year tradition of taking examinations, the Chinese would not be outdone in tests. In the beginning, a score of 500 was considered respectable, and 550 won praise. In the nineties, a score below 600 was considered a failure, and perfect scores were frequent.

After mastering the TOEFL, students advanced to other tests, such as the GRE, and conquered them too. An example was published in *People's Daily* (overseas edition), November 3, 1992:

Zou Qiuzhen, Only 18, Leaves for the U.S. for Doctoral Studies

From our news service. Zou Qiuzhen, an eighteen-year-old who just graduated from the Department of Radio Engineering of Southeastern University, has been admitted to Stanford University. At this time, he is on his way to America to begin his doctoral studies. . . . In May, in the general examination for graduate students and the English proficiency examination for foreign students, both written and administered by an American testing agency, Zou Qiuzhen scored 2,130 in the GRE and 630 in the TOEFL. Based on these scores and the letters of recommendation from his college, several prestigious American colleges competed in offering him admission.

The story had been circulating that many departmental chairs in American colleges, faced with several Chinese applicants with equally high test scores, were hard pressed in their selections. These professors may have been impressed by the diligence and the intellect of the Chinese students, but it would have been difficult for them to understand that, to many Chinese students, the TOEFL was not simply a test of English proficiency but a means of winning a struggle for a new life.

EXPLORING AVENUES TO THE NEW WORLD

In China, life was pretty much set at birth. From kindergarten through high school, people had little choice about schools, textbooks, or clothing. The reason was simple: schools admitted only neighborhood children; stores were short of food for the body as well as for the mind. The resumption of a uniform college entrance examination allowed individuals opportunities, for the first time in their lives, to shape their futures. But once you entered college, your life resumed its predictability. You would be assigned to a certain class and a certain dormitory. During the day you would attend classes according to a fixed curriculum, and at night you would sleep in the same room with others who were unlikely to cherish the same ideas or follow the same path as you. After college, you would be assigned to your work unit. Thereafter, your life would be so straight that you could predict it until the very end: you would date, court, and marry according to socially acceptable norms; have one child according to the guidelines of the Neighborhood Planned Parenthood Committee; receive a housing allocation when you became thirty or so (if you had not committed political errors); be promoted at about forty; and retire at sixty. After retirement you would practice *qigong* in the morning or take a stroll after dinner, until you died.¹³ Upon death you would be assured of a memorial gathering.

Most Chinese had become accustomed to this choiceless life and did not feel its terror. On the contrary, after being so conditioned, they became worry-free. Like tamed animals, they lost their wild nature and life force. They were overtaken by inertia.

But going abroad changed all that.

A thirty-nine-year-old student, who went to America in 1982, recalled that after he and others had endured the grueling examination, they were sent to Beijing Language School. There they received language training and instruction on foreign culture. At the conclusion of the training, they all waited patiently for their assignments to foreign colleges, just as they had after college graduation. Instead, they were told that they then had to apply to American colleges for admission and scholarships on their own; the Chinese government would fund only the travel cost and subsistence for the first year. The students were all shell-shocked.

China's socialist, planned educational system was thus spliced onto the American educational system of capitalist self-determination.

For those who went with private financial means, the process required a personal commitment, sometimes even some personal sacrifice. In that very process, China's youth understood for the first time the meaning of freedom.

When you walked into the reading room of the Beijing Library and opened guidebooks to American colleges, you saw the thousands of colleges listed alphabetically: their names, fields of study, admission standards, tuition, scholarship availability, addresses . . . The reading made you dizzy with fantasy. Although you were still sitting in the room, your heart already reverberated with those calls. Maybe you could apply to Harvard, or Berkeley; yes, you could go to Hawaii, but also Alaska . . . You were choosing your own destiny.

That distant, mysterious, and alluring New World thus became faintly visible from those densely printed volumes. This discovery of the New World was one of the most important events in China in the eighties. That generation of China's youth was no less passionate and courageous than Columbus.

Illustrating the newly gained initiative of Chinese students was the drastic change in funding sources within a short time. In 1979, 54 percent of the students who went to America were financed by the government or by their work units. In 1985 that percentage decreased to 17, while at the same time 57 percent found support from American colleges on their own.

Of course, to probe the New World required not only commitment and courage, but also strategies and techniques.

Tens of thousands of application letters left China and went to the several thousand American colleges, from the most prestigious to the unknown, from the Ivy League to community colleges, from language schools to seminaries.

Applicants were moved to find that the American colleges answered every inquiry and always enclosed a beautifully printed catalog or other document in their reply. In China, people had been conditioned not to expect a reply to their inquiries. So when youths living in back alleys in Beijing or Shanghai suddenly received letters from American colleges bearing the signatures of departmental chairs, they were overwhelmed by the seemingly undeserved flattery.

The admission process of American colleges required a lot of paperwork. Generally, the colleges required a completed application form, an

original undergraduate transcript, two or three letters of recommendation from professors, the TOEFL and GRE (for applying for graduate studies) report, and proof of ability to pay or a financial guarantee. Several months of running around were required to assemble these documents.

To meet the hard-nosed American-style admission requirements, which are stringent but not rigid in terms of test scores and sources of funds, many Chinese quickly learned how to sell themselves. Some invented techniques with a Chinese flavor.

Admission application forms usually had a section called "Describe Yourself"; it asked about the applicant's motivation or research plan. The colleges took the answer seriously. A Chinese equivalent would be "Motivation for Joining the Party" in a CCP membership application. To many students, to go abroad was the end, and to study was only the means; it was a matter of seizing an opportunity in life, not just learning a special skill. Some strategic thinking was called for. To increase the chance of landing a scholarship, many students changed their field of study to an obscure one so that competition for scholarships would be less severe. Of course, you would never say so in "Describe Yourself." Instead, you would start with "Since early childhood I have had a passionate love of studying . . ." The essay would go on to describe your unyielding devotion in the past and your planned dedication to the subject in the future. The specialty could be education of disabled children, though you might have repeatedly resisted a teaching assignment after you graduated from your teachers college; it could be Sanskrit, although your knowledge about India and Buddhism might be limited to what you read in *The Journey to the West*.¹⁴

The college transcript was a realm allowing great individual creativity. Because of differences in educational systems, curriculum, grading systems, and language, a transcript, once translated, acquired a higher luster. "Selective Readings in Marxism-Leninism" became "Philosophy of the West," "International Communist Movements" became "International Politics," "Theory of Political Economy" became "Theory of Macroscopic Economy," and "Moral Education" became "Ethics," "Psychology," or "Anthropology." Even readings in political indoctrination, such as "The Thirteenth Congress of . . ." or the "The Fourteenth Congress of . . ." became "Theory of Political Science" or "A Study of Chinese Politics." As to the conversion of grades, from Excellent, Superior, Average, and Below Average to A, B, C, and D, each person had

a personal conversion standard. There were other ingenious moves to promote a favorable perception. For example, to promote an impression of one's personal creativity, some people sent artwork that had nothing to do with the field of study, and others with confidence in their good looks enclosed a personal portrait. A friend of mine enclosed a chance photograph of herself with Zhao Ziyang, the ex-secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party. She received exceptional attention.

In China professors rarely wrote letters of recommendation. Even if a professor knew some English, it would be hard to write letter after letter for students. Thus letters of recommendation, though signed by the professors, were frequently composed and written by the students. It required talent and creativity to write three letters of praise that differed in content and style.

Preparation for the TOEFL and GRE required hard work, but there were also a few instances of people taking the tests for others.

Some complained that the application process was full of dirty tricks. A few went to the extreme. A woman who came from north China and enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley told me that the I-20 form she used for applying for her passport was forged.¹⁵ She did not say how she received her visa. But then, I thought, if she could fool people as alert as the officers in the Chinese Bureau of Public Safety, she would have had no problem fooling the foreign officials.

Money was a decisive factor in the admission process. Except for the few students who were supported by the government, few people could afford the tuition. Thus, getting a scholarship or teaching assistantship became the key to success.

It was far easier for science and engineering students to receive financial support. The need for technical people in American college laboratories offered tremendous opportunities for Chinese students, who were capable, hard-working, and relatively inexpensive when they worked as laboratory technicians. Students from a reasonably good college in China, after persistent tries, usually had a good chance of being admitted to an American college and receiving financial aid. Many students used the opportunity of being the local guide for a visiting American professor to establish a personal contact. These contacts greatly enhanced the success rate of an applicant and were far more effective than dealing exclusively with the admissions office.

Humanities students were not so fortunate. There were far fewer scholarships and fellowships available, and the competition for them

was keen. But persistence generally yielded results. In addition to searching for an obscure field of study, applicants first tried to find a financial guarantor to accomplish the task of getting to America. How to make a living would come after arrival.

Finding a financial guarantor required knowing someone in America. But not every Chinese had relatives in America. An "overseas connection," however, could be cultivated. Hence numerous comedies, tragedies, and cliff-hanging dramas unfolded.

In the early eighties, when I was still in college in China, the college administration notified students of the following story. A student got to know an American and asked him to be his financial guarantor. The American willingly obliged and expeditiously helped him with all the paperwork. When the student arrived in America, he went to the address of his financial guarantor. Behold, it was the address of an organization affiliated with the CIA! The authenticity of the story was not verified, but the school administration used it to serve warning to all students: stay vigilant in class struggle!

Of course, not every story was so scary. One story I heard in the language continuing-education school had a happy ending. A graduate of the Foreign Language School had dreamed for a long time of going to America. Unfortunately, a search of his family genealogy yielded not even a distant relative in America. By chance, however, he met an elderly American woman touring China, and he volunteered to be her guide for two days. After the American returned, he sent her audiotapes in which he called her "my American mother" and, making effective use of his language training, expressed an affectionate longing for her. The elderly woman was so moved by her "Chinese child" that she became his financial guarantor.

When I was in the United States, an American student told me about her experience in China. She said everybody was nice to her and she made quite a few friends. But one thing made her feel awkward: many people asked her discretely whether she could be their financial guarantor. She said, "I told them, 'I'm poor. I'm really poor.'" I know she was telling the truth; not every American can afford to be a financial guarantor. Many American students have to take out loans or work at odd jobs to finance their own education.

The search for new lands of opportunity first concentrated in America and Western Europe. Then it turned to Canada, Japan, Australia, and

New Zealand. Still later it spilled into Eastern Europe and Latin American countries, or any other country that would accept Chinese students.

The following statistics confirm that trend.

In 1978 twenty-eight countries hosted more than four hundred students sent by the Chinese government; in 1979, the number of countries increased to forty-one.¹⁶ Four years later, it increased to fifty-four, and in 1984, to sixty-three.¹⁷ On November 24, 1988, *Guangming Daily* reported that in the ten years after students were again being sent abroad, China had sent students to seventy-six countries.¹⁸ By the beginning of 1993, according to *People's Daily*, Chinese students had set foot in more than one hundred countries.

In 1979, of the 1,200 students who had been sent abroad, about 500 went to the United States, 300 to Britain, 200 to West Germany and France, and only 100 to Japan.¹⁹ The number of students going to Canada increased from 1,200 in 1986 to 3,250 in 1989.²⁰ In the same period, many more went to Japan and Australia. In Japan remedial students from Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities were studying Japanese language in preparation for regular attendance in a college. In 1983 Australia had just over seventy privately financed Chinese students but had 4,810 in 1987.²¹ In 1989 the number exceeded 10,000. As a result, the Australian government tightened its requirements on the admission of foreign students.²²

Then in the late eighties some language schools in foreign countries began accepting applications directly from China. This development triggered a rapid increase in the number of Chinese students in Canada, Japan, and Australia. The language schools provided an opportunity to study abroad for those who could not attend a regular college for one reason or another. Admission to these schools required no transcripts or TOEFL or GRE scores, but only tuition and plane fare. Thus, many people determined to go abroad went into debt, pawned their heirlooms, and left behind their spouses and children.

But problems quickly arose because of the sharp increase in applicants, the emergence of profit-oriented language schools, and the inadequate preparation of some of the students. Governments on both sides became concerned. In the fourth Sino-Japanese Civilian Conference, held in Beijing April 28–30, 1988, the issue of Chinese students in Japan was a topic of discussion. According to *People's Daily*, "Both sides expressed special concern about the rapid increase of privately financed Chinese

students in Japan since 1985 and their academic and nonacademic problems. There are now problems that should not have occurred."²³ In Australia 50 percent of the Chinese students had only high school or even lower levels of education.²⁴ In addition, disputes arose over the return of the tuition money when visas were unobtainable or when language schools went bankrupt. These events led to diplomatic negotiations between the two countries.

Following the rapid saturation of the language-school market in Canada, Japan, and Australia, Chinese students started to find new countries for studying abroad, such as Hungary, New Zealand, and many countries in South America. In the nineties if you should meet a Chinese student in the Maldives, Belize, or Niue, don't be startled.

When studying abroad became only a means toward the goal of going abroad, methods to achieve that goal blossomed. The bureaucrats made use of their authority; the famous, their connections; the movie stars, their names and faces. Ordinary citizens had their own plots: some took the fast track of marrying a foreigner and emigrated; some, staking their lives, tried entry by having themselves smuggled. Meanwhile the concept of studying abroad became broader and more encompassing. Some practiced their culinary skills as devotedly as their English vocabularies, hoping to possess a talent that would never fail them; others took up English as a supplement to their *qigong* practice, aspiring to the lofty goal of rendering health benefits to the foreigners across the ocean.

In that tidal wave of going abroad in the eighties, the Chinese people witnessed many dramas, some comical, others sad. Many of them led to regrets and others were utterly deplorable. But one undeniable feature emerged: people began to shed their inertia and regain their life force. Going abroad reinvigorated the spirit of the Chinese people.

When the offspring in a family become dispirited, they stay put and fight tooth and nail for the family legacy no matter how meager it is. But if they have high aspirations, they walk out of the house to create their own future.

China was just such a family. In the eighties, thousands and thousands of China's youth met the challenge of going abroad to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Could this be foretelling the rise to prosperity of China in the next century?

THE OMNIPOTENT WORK UNIT

For many people the difficulty of going abroad lay not in being admitted to a university or obtaining a passport, but in obtaining permission from their work unit.

In China, the social structure consisted of the government and the family. The pivotal institution that supported the government above it and enlightened the family below it was a person's work unit. The government could be loved or scorned, the family could be ignored or fragmented, but one must not commit an offense against one's work unit. The work unit was omnipotent in dispensing all social benefits: it managed birth, aging, sickness, and death; it decided what one ate and drank and where one disposed of waste; it issued pay, allocated housing and holiday goods, and admitted children to kindergarten. Finally, it was the situs of everyone's dossier. Although nobody knew what was in that dossier, not knowing where it was would assuredly make people anxious.

After you had been admitted to a university and had received a financial guarantee, you had to obtain a letter of recommendation from your work unit before applying for a passport. Whether you could get such a letter depended on how enlightened the head of your work unit was, or the mood of the personnel administrator authorized to write such letters.

The Chinese language is flexible, hence rules and regulations written in it also are flexible. Furthermore, only the leadership and the administrators knew the rules. If the head of your unit or the personnel administrator wished to prevent you from leaving, they could accomplish their objective by praising you: "Such a talent cannot be allowed to drain out," "Indispensable." Sometimes they gave no reason.

To wear down the leadership required mastering the art of persuasion.

Some tried sincerity: "You see, I've never asked for special favors like joining the Party, bigger housing, or exemption from the one-child-per-family rule. I have only this one wish to go abroad. Please help me."

Some took a light-hearted approach: "You can view it as a sentence of ten-year banishment, executed overseas."

Some took a crude approach: "Boss, you can regard me as a fart—just let me go."

To deal with the human resources department, one had to be extra humble. I believe that everyone who went into the office of human

resources to obtain a letter of recommendation was smiling, no matter how overbearing they might have been elsewhere. Sometimes civility in manners had to be supplemented by civility in substance. I met a student in Ohio, then over forty, who absolutely refused to return to China even though he had received his Ph.D. and had not found work. One of the reasons was the crushing humiliation dealt to him by his work unit when he was asking for permission to leave. He said, "I never want to go through that again."

Colleagues in the work unit could also be a problem. At times, their curiosity went beyond normal friendly concern. When the idea of going abroad was barely formulated, they would ask, "When are you leaving?" Before you had received your passport, they would ask, "Are you coming back?" A few days later they would say in astonishment, "What, you're still here!" A colleague who had no desire to go abroad himself said you should never publicize your intention before you leave; deny it vehemently until you receive your passport. Even if you are already abroad, make sure that when you call China, you say, "I haven't left yet." Although your colleagues have no authority to stop you from going, an unsolicited report from a colleague in a time of political sensitivity could destroy all your dreams.

The following is a rather ordinary story of the time:

A woman from Jiangsu majored in foreign languages and graduated in the class of 1984 from a reputable university in Shanghai. She is now a staff member in a well-known international organization.

In college, aside from her daily one-lap jog around the campus at four o'clock in the afternoon, she spent all her free time facing a wall to practice her spoken English. By the time she graduated, she was nearsighted and suffered from insomnia. Her command of English, however, far surpassed that of her classmates. She was admitted to graduate studies at a university in Beijing, specializing in oral translation of English. She became the first graduate student in the department ever to pass an international examination on English translation. Later she passed her second one, now in German, and became the only person in China who had passed both examinations. She was twenty-five.

After graduation she was retained to teach a twice-weekly English drill class. Other than that, she spent her time in political studies and on a campus beautification project.

Many of her classmates went abroad in this period. She knew very well that it would be impossible to improve skills further if she did not go abroad. Also, if she

did not use these languages, her command of them would falter and fall behind her classmates. Besides, she was young; the glittering world outside was more attractive than her shared-room dormitory.²⁵ She decided to study abroad.

Several colleges in America, Canada, and Europe accepted her and gave her a scholarship or fellowship. After two years of teaching the English drill class, she requested permission from the department to study abroad. The departmental chair was also her former teacher. This woman, about 50, like many other middle-aged intellectuals, was formal, serious, and principled, but also stiff.

"It is not yet the time for you to go abroad," the chairperson explained to her in a simple, firm, nonnegotiable tone. "You're young. There will be plenty of opportunities for that later."

The young woman was speechless. She could not start a contentious argument, nor could she figure out the reason for the denial. Against school policy? Many others had left. Against departmental policy? But she was not assigned any serious work. In fact, she was not even certified to teach regular courses. Had she offended the departmental chair? No, they appeared to be getting along all right.

Actually, there was no reason other than that, in the view of the departmental chair, it was not the right time for her to leave. She made repeated visits, but the departmental chair would not budge. The young woman could not even get a copy of her transcript. Angrily, she announced her resignation. That was refused also: she would have to first reimburse the government ¥20,000 that it cost to educate her.²⁶ She felt wronged and helpless. The only relief was to cry in her dormitory.

Opportunities slipped away one after the other. The American universities agreed to hold her admission space and her scholarship for one more year, but they could not do it indefinitely. She turned twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight . . . She began avoiding the departmental chair, who now made her nervous and frightened. Although she was bitterly resentful, she knew her obstruction was not personal vengeance. Sometimes she wished that the departmental chair was simply wicked, in which case she could have been bribed.

The departmental Party secretary, however, was sympathetic. Privately he offered consolation and empty promises. Out of gratitude and a desire to maintain a good relationship, she frequently gave him presents from abroad, and once she gave him her allotment of imported goods and American dollars from attending an international conference.²⁷ But the support of the Party secretary could not sway the departmental chair.

Then in June 1989, events took a dramatic turn. One day, the departmental chair called the young woman in. "Go! You can all go!" This diligent woman was obviously agitated over all the people who wanted to go abroad.

So, after three years, the departmental chair approved her resignation.

Perhaps it is true that one reaps what one sows. At about the time of her departure for Europe, the departmental chair encountered similar troubles. She was to be transferred to a government office abroad when the June Fourth Incident broke out. Her departure was stopped at the last moment by the president of her university in Shanghai, who had received an unsolicited report disclosing some of her words and conduct before the June Fourth Incident. She had no choice but to stay, to respond to the allegations. That took a year and a half.

Three years later the two women met again at an international meeting in Brussels. Both then had long-term contracts with the same international organization. Time had passed and the scene had changed; neither brought up the old sores. They got together and made dumplings to celebrate their reunion.

When I met the first woman, she had already worked abroad for many years. After reflecting on the many wrongs she had endured in China, she complained about the lonely life abroad and the there-is-nothing-to-do work environment in her international organization. Then abruptly she remarked that she might have accomplished something in China had she stayed.

I said, "Then why don't you go back?"

She thought for a while and said, "It's better here—at least I am free."

I could understand that.

In contemporary China, the individual and the work unit, respectively the receiver and the dispenser of all benefits, have a subordinate-superior relationship. To a large extent, the degree of freedom an individual can enjoy depends on the unit and its leadership. Through the unit, political pressure can be gradually dissolved or infinitely intensified and personal freedom greatly expanded or sharply curtailed. Thus, political persecution often has been persecution by the work unit or a personal vendetta by its leadership. That was true during the Anti-Rightist Movement and also during the Cultural Revolution.²⁸

I have often thought that if China should ever reform its political system, it should probably start with the abolishment of the omnipotent work unit.

In the eighties the National Education Commission began implementing an "agreement" system: people who wished to study abroad had to agree to return to their work units upon completing their studies. From these agreements, one could see the shadow of the subordinate-superior relationship. Like Faust, applicants exchanged their freedom in the future for the opportunity at hand. The unit, under the guise of national interest, maintained its control over the individual.

In China even the rule of law had never earned high respect, let alone an "agreement." But these agreements involved not only the political relationship between the individual and the work unit but also their monetary relationship. Mingling money and politics led to disputes. According to a newspaper report, one institution in Shanghai used the agreement to press a yet-to-return student for financial compensation. The charge and countercharge went to court, but the judgment is unknown. Another story is told about a student whose university sent him abroad and who repeatedly postponed his return. Armed with the agreement, the university sought compensation from the student's father, an elderly intellectual of high repute. But when high finances are at stake, civility is abandoned. The student's father pounded on the desk and shouted, "Money, I don't have! Life, I do! Come and take it!" The university controlled the damage by quietly withdrawing its demand.

Assaulted repeatedly by the tide of people going abroad, this subordinate-superior relationship showed signs of loosening. Around 1988 the Department of Labor, the National Science Commission, the Guanghai Company, and, it has been said, also the Ministry of National Security established many human-resource exchange centers. They served as the guardians of dossiers of people who had been denied permission from their work units to leave. These centers provided the documents that individuals needed to proceed with their applications. In exchange, the individuals paid a monthly dossier-storage fee. These centers were probably disciplined later, but at that time they helped those who were admitted by foreign universities but could not secure permission from their work unit to leave. What is not known is whether those who registered for dossier storage are still paying monthly storage fees today.

DASHED DREAMS AT THE AMERICAN EMBASSY

To many Chinese youth, China's "front door" was narrow, but the visa window of the various foreign consulate offices was narrower still.

In January 1990, six months after June Fourth Incident, a time when many people in China were eagerly seeking to go abroad, President George Bush issued an administrative order to "protect" Chinese

students in America.²⁹ On January 26 the front page of the *New York Times* published an article from Beijing:

Despite concern that China might stop allowing students to go to the United States, many Chinese students say the main obstacle to going abroad is the United States Embassy. Students who wish to go abroad must get approval from employers and security agencies. But for many students who have been accepted at American universities, rejection is more likely to come when they apply for an American visa.

In the article, *Times* reporter Nicholas Kristof said ironically, “Dreams are dashed each day at the United States Embassy.”

Yes, reality is at times both laughable and cruel.

In the early eighties, when passports symbolized privileges, getting a visa was not difficult for officially sponsored and privately financed students alike; the world welcomed the students from long-isolated China with the same zeal it showed for giant pandas. In the mid-eighties, as China’s policy on studying abroad relaxed and the number of students soared, the visa policy of many countries became increasingly rigid and the rate of refusal sharply increased. There had always been a subtle relationship between the width of China’s “front door” and the narrowness of the visa windows in various consulates. But in general it became increasingly difficult to get a visa as years went by. This was especially so for privately financed students.

On the morning of May 12, 1989, I went to the American Embassy on Xiushui Street to find out how to get a visa. I knew many others who did the same: before you actually applied for a visa, you made on-site exploratory visits. Getting a visa, like a marriage, had an impact on your whole life and was not to be trifled with.

There was a crowd outside the embassy. Those who had turned in their applications were already in the courtyard. The people outside, other than those making their exploratory visits, were professional “observers” and “well-informed people.” There, you could hear all the latest developments.

“It seems that they have stopped giving F-1 visas,” a middle-aged woman stated. Her voice lacked conviction, indicating that she had heard this second-hand.

"Impossible. They only made it a little more strict," a young man in a tweed suit said authoritatively.

"You've got to show a receipt for the tuition payment before they give you a visa. This is a new practice implemented by the new ambassador," someone interjected.

"Nobody can predict the outcome," the man in the tweed suit said. "If they give, you get a visa. If they don't, you don't get a visa. A few days ago, a student from Tianjin came to apply. He was well equipped—he had a full scholarship for a J-1 visa. It looked like smooth sailing. But during the interview that kid talked too much. He said that he was doing important research at his school in China. So the American said, 'Well, if you are doing such important work here, you shouldn't leave.' He already had been given the yellow slip. Then suddenly everything fell through."

Everybody felt sorry for that young man.

"That consul must have had a fight with his wife the night before," someone commented.

"It would be nice to know somebody inside," the middle-aged woman lamented. Unexpectedly, the comment elicited another story from the young man in the tweed suit.

"A friend of mine knows the Chinese secretary quite well. One day the Chinese secretary called and asked him to turn in his application as soon as possible, since a consul's wife had just found out that she was pregnant."

"A lot of visas were granted during Bush's visit," someone else interjected.

In those days, on Monday through Friday mornings the embassy accepted applications for F-1 visas for privately financed students; on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons it accepted application for J-1 visas for government-financed students and visiting scholars.

On July 26, 1989, I went to apply for a visa. Finally, I was in the courtyard. Before being admitted to the building, I first completed an application handed out by a loquacious young Chinese man.

"Oh, a reporter! I guess you are not coming back." I said that of course I would come back. The young man, now with a broad smile, said, "No problem, you can tell me the truth. Certainly you're not coming back. Are you?" I kept quiet.

I turned in the application before I entered the building. Two Chinese secretaries made sure that all documents were in order. Then we

were led inside. At one end of the room were several rows of chairs. A partition had been placed in the middle of the room. The work window for the consul's office was on the other side of the partition. More than thirty Chinese sat there silently, waiting for their turn to be called for the interview.

A story, which might incite a nationalistic indignation in some people, had been circulating. One day, the waiting compatriots had become impatient and started chatting. Some even stood up, peeking through the cracks of the partition to see what was going on. Suddenly, an annoyed woman consul burst into the waiting area, pointed her finger at several people and said, "You, you, and you. There will be no visa for you. You may leave now." They were stunned and then started to plead. Among them was a girl, who began to cry. The Chinese secretary returned their documents and said, "The American's upset. There's nothing I can do."

Some people who came out appeared light-hearted; obviously their applications had been approved. A middle-aged man who was interviewed before I was came out dejected; his financial guarantee, written by the Bank of China, was not acceptable. Another young man also had trouble. He had been studying in America and was planning to have his wife visit him. Then his wife was diagnosed with lung cancer and he rushed back. Now his wife had died and he wanted to resume his studies. The consul said his IAP-66 form would expire in a month and he needed a new one for his visa.³⁰ His sad story did not move the American consul.

Then it was my turn.

"Why are you going to the United States?"

"To attend a training program in journalism at the University of Michigan," I answered.

"How long do you plan to stay in the United States?"

"About a year," I said.

"Welcome," the woman consul said. "You can pick up your visa on August 2."

I sighed happily. It was so simple, so disappointingly simple. I had been expecting a tense and terrifying encounter.

The truly exciting scene occurred outside the embassy compound. As soon as I walked out the gate, a swarm of people surrounded me as if I were a movie star.

"You got it?"

“Did they speak to you in English or Chinese?”

“How much is your scholarship?”

People anxiously sought guidance from other people's experience, whether success or failure.

Generally speaking, it was not too hard to get a J-1 visa, as it carried a two-year stay limit, after which the visa holder had to return to China. Another reason was that the financial assistance for J-1 visa applicants was secured. The privately financed students applying for the F-1 visa, however, faced much tougher struggles.

Early each morning, many applicants queued up outside the American Embassy. Sometimes, because of the huge crowd, the embassy resorted to giving out numbers. The busiest time was just before the beginning of the fall semester in American colleges. I heard that the numbers handed out on January 26, 1989, were for visa interviews scheduled for mid-August. Some people queued for the visa interview numbers before they even had a passport.

If what went on outside the embassy compound was an endurance battle, what went on inside was a blitzkrieg. Sometimes a lifetime dream and several years of work were destroyed in those few minutes of conversation with the consul.

The American consuls could interview close to a hundred people each morning, but only those who were admitted to prestigious colleges and awarded full scholarships had a chance of getting a visa. Those who relied on friends or relatives as their financial guarantors were most likely refused a visa. The reasons varied. For example, a certain document did not meet the requirement, the amount of the financial guarantee was insufficient, the field of study and the applicant's background were mismatched, or the applicant was a single woman of marriageable age. Of course, “having an inclination to immigrate” was the most frequently cited reason.

The authority for granting a visa rested completely with the consuls. Each consul had his or her own criteria and hence each applicant had his or her own luck.

Two consuls were well known by their nicknames within the circle of applicants in Beijing. One was “Big Beard” and the other “Miss Taiwan.” Big Beard, so the story went around, was muddle-headed and, when in a good mood, would approve numerous visa applications, while Miss Taiwan was picky and biased against mainland Chinese

and would approve none. Those in the waiting crowd probably were all praying that they would be interviewed by Big Beard, not by the unlucky Miss Taiwan.

The feelings after having one's application denied were complex. First was the suffering: a dream embraced for several years was suddenly dashed. Some people had staked everything on the project: they had resigned from their work units, broken up their families, run around procuring the needed documents, and spent all their savings. Now they had to return to the same old reality. But the hardest to bear was the letdown of spirits. Many people wanted to go abroad because of the repeated disappointments in their own country; they rested their hope, be it the yearning for democracy or the pursuit of happiness, on that distant land of freedom. Now the land of freedom had declared, indifferently, "No."

Nobody knew how many dreams were dashed outside the American Embassy every day. But behind each broken dream was a small tragedy.

I still remember one scene clearly to this day. It was in early 1989. I passed the American Embassy and saw a young man in a suit standing motionless, head bowed, hands tightly gripping the railing outside the embassy. People looked at him curiously. The young man, perhaps suddenly aware that he was the center of attention, turned around, held up a package of documents, and said in a voice of pain and suffering, "My documents are all complete, all complete! Everything." Obviously he had just been denied his visa request.

Then there were those who would never give up.

A thirty-four-year-old woman was a graduate of a foreign-language school. She was not beautiful, but she had a clear head and boundless energy. After college she had been assigned to teach in a high school. Being single, she was not given housing, nor did she wish to live with her parents. Living out of a suitcase, she slept on any vacant bed that she could find in the dormitories of her friends. Although she led a colorless life, she had a colorful dream: to study abroad. For that dream she resigned from her high-school position and applied to study abroad on private financial means. She started with her Neighborhood Committee,³¹ worked her way up, and finally received her passport. But she was denied an American visa. Three months later she was denied again and was told not to reapply for one year. She was disappointed but not dissuaded. She earned her living by doing translation work for a foreign publisher. Then the thought of going to Europe began to take

root. After all documents were in order, she was refused a British visa. After that, she tried Denmark, Belgium, and once again the United States. As of the summer of 1992, according to a friend of hers, she was still trying.

The American consuls were keenly aware that they were the makers of the daily tragedies. A colleague whom I met at the University of Michigan worked in a consulate in China. He told me that he tried his best to give out visas. Sometimes when he had to deny an application, he was pained by the applicant's suffering. His older colleague, on the other hand, perhaps because he had gone through this for many years, was unsympathetic. He turned down applications frequently and justified refusals by saying, "Don't give them visas. Once they're in America, they'll never come back." These words were harsh but true.

As the difficulty of getting an American visa mounted, the applicants flooded the Canadian Embassy. Soon the refusal rate there rose also.

In 1985, because of the admission procedures of language schools in Japan and Australia, the consulates of these countries suddenly became busy. The bustle lasted until October 1988, when the Japanese government suddenly tightened its review of visa applications for Chinese students wishing to study Japanese in these language schools. In Shanghai alone, thirty-five thousand students with passports and admission notices could not begin their journeys because they lacked visas. On November 7, 1988, thousands of youths demonstrated outside the Japanese Consulate. They chanted, "Our broad swords land on the neck of these ghosts."³² Several years later, the Australian government faced a diplomatic controversy on the issue of tuition refunds after Chinese students were refused visas. On August 30, 1989, it issued a new rule: beginning in 1990, all applicants had to first undergo a "qualification appraisal," and only those who met the requirements would be allowed to apply for a visa. The earlier incident outside the Japanese Consulate was now repeated outside the Australian Consulate. Beginning on October 6, 1989, several hundred Chinese students who had been refused visas demonstrated outside the Australian Consulate, protesting the new policy. They pounded on the sedans parked outside the office, shouting, "Cheaters! Cheaters!"

During that period, some embassies that rarely attracted visitors also became the focus of thousands of visa applicants, but they quickly recovered their calm after tightening requirements for visas.

The reality was simple: No country in the world could accept that many Chinese students. This reality could not be altered by one's love of freedom or by these countries' respect for human rights.

The going-abroad craze in the eighties has been described as the great triumphant runaway; the Chinese, who had suffered various disappointments in their land, longed to run away from that land. But they quickly discovered that there were few places they could go.

This is perhaps the sorrow of this generation of Chinese. We are Chinese, but we wish to leave China. Many years from now, perhaps after we have journeyed around the world, we may come to realize once more that our most precious possession is right under our feet: the land that we inherited from our ancestors, however impoverished or scarred it may be.

HOW MANY HAVE GONE ABROAD? WHO ARE THEY?

How many students have left since 1978? An accurate number is hard to come by.

In October 1988, Leo A. Orleans's book *Chinese Students in America: Policies, Issues and Numbers* was published in America. The author, a China specialist from the Library of Congress, wrote in the Introduction, "Neither the Chinese nor the Americans know precisely how many Chinese students and scholars are in the United States now or at any time since exchanges began in 1978."

We also do not know how many students are in other countries, nor do we know the number of students who went abroad in any given year, sponsored by government institutions or privately financed, as visiting scholars or graduate or undergraduate students. The problem is not lack of data, but rather contradictory data.

Let us use the first few years as an example.

In 1978, the first year in which students were sent abroad, the number was 480, according to *People's Daily*.³³ But an official count completed in August 1988 gave the number 314 (80 undergraduate, 5 graduate, 229 visiting scholars), a discrepancy of 166 people.³⁴ A possible explanation is that the former number includes students who went to countries in areas other than North America and Europe.

The number for 1979 also is problematic. According to *China Education Almanac*, the number was 1,750. Leo Orleans gives the number

2,700, which was provided by Xinhua News Agency, but the government figure was 1,277.³⁵ In addition, these numbers do not include those who left on private financial means.³⁶ According to *China Education Almanac* (1980), the number from September 1978 to the end of 1979 was 2,700, but this was changed to 3,480 in the 1981 edition of *China Encyclopedia Almanac*.³⁷

The accurate number for 1980 is also unknown. According to *China Education Almanac* and *China Encyclopedia Almanac*, the number of students sponsored by government institutions was 2,124, China's official count completed in 1988 was 1,862, whereas Leo Orleans gave the number 5,192 (provided by Xinhua News Agency).³⁸ It is possible that the last number is a composite that includes students financed by private means, estimated at 3,000 to 4,000. The table in appendix 2 gives the numbers of students studying abroad from 1978 to 1988, according to the various sources.

We will never know exactly how many students have gone abroad since 1978. First, since China at that time lacked the technical knowledge for accurate recording and treatment of data, there were inevitable errors and omissions in the statistics. Second, there were many avenues out of China. For instance, someone who was publicly financed could have received funds from either the government or their work unit; and someone who was privately financed could have received funds from private sources with public sponsorship or from purely private sources. Also, many people first went abroad for family visits, on official travel, or as tourists and later changed to student status. If they were included in the count, the total number would far exceed the numbers given in the table.

Although the numbers vary and are at times contradictory, two call for special attention. At the end of 1988, in its Open Door annual report, the International Education Association stated that in 1987 and 1988 the country that sent the most students abroad was China, with a total of 42,481 study-abroad students, while Taiwan had the most students in America.³⁹ But in less than a year, the U.S. Information Agency reported in November 1989 that, according to a survey of American colleges for the 1989–90 academic year, the total number of students from the Chinese mainland was 29,040, exceeding the number of students from Taiwan for the first time.⁴⁰

All sources agree that the number of Chinese students studying abroad increased every year from 1978 to 1989. In the decade before 1989, the total number of students abroad was 70,000; it reached

170,000 in 1991 and 190,000 in 1992. The latest number, for 1995, was 220,000.⁴¹

A question directly related to "How many?" is "Who?" This is perhaps even more important.

A favorite and frequent comment of the print media in Taiwan and Hong Kong was that most of these students were the children of highly placed officials; that is, sending children abroad was one of the privileges of the most privileged class in contemporary China.

Although numerous examples could be cited to support this argument, the statement was misleading, as it was not based on an analysis of the data. Overall, the selection process had been similar to that for college admission—fair and competitive. This is not to say that it was free of corruption and abuses by the specially privileged. As a government policy, whether in its initial formulation or in its later implementation, it treated everybody equally—a rather rare occurrence in China.

In March 1990 the Chinese Political-Science Students and Scholars Association of America administered a survey on issues related to China's politics. Questionnaires were sent to Chinese students at eighteen colleges, including Harvard, the University of California at Berkeley, and others. A report was written based on 360 replies. A result that interested me was an analysis of the background of the students and scholars: 52 percent were from big cities, 29.8 percent from medium-sized cities, 8.4 percent from small towns, and 8.8 percent from rural areas. As to their family backgrounds, 51.8 percent were from families of intellectuals, 24 percent from families in government services, 10 percent from working-class families, and 7.2 percent from peasant families. The author of the survey stated, "The majority of the students and scholars were male, came from a big city and an academic institution, were born in the sixties and raised in an intellectual family, did not join a political organization, and received a fairly high academic degree."⁴²

These data and analyses may lack precision but should be fairly factual and do not support the criticism of rampant favoritism.

DIFFERENT POLITICAL CLIMATES, DIFFERENT POLICIES

The leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese government, when meeting with Chinese students or discussing policy on studying abroad, loved to say that the policy would not change.

On May 29, 1980, Hua Guofeng, the premier at that time, met about fifty Chinese students in Tokyo during his visit to Japan. This ex-chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, a person known for his repeated emphasis on China's self-reliance in its economic development, told the students warmly, "We should control our own destiny and be self-reliant, but we should not isolate ourselves. We must learn useful things from other countries, including advanced science and technology and management." He continued, "In the future China will send students to other countries to learn business administration. Our business administration is also behind that of other countries."⁴³ This was probably the first time that he, as the leader of the Party and the government, commented on China's policy of sending students abroad.

In November 1983, Hu Yaobang, the secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party, visited Japan. In the atmosphere of "China and Japan being friends for generations to come," someone questioned him about China's Clean Up Spiritual Pollution Campaign.⁴⁴ Hu stated that the campaign would in fact advance, not slow, China's policy of opening up.⁴⁵ But from Tokyo to Kyoto, he could not disengage himself from the issue of cleaning up "spiritual pollution," so he stated repeatedly, "Ridding China of spiritual pollution will merely wipe the dust off our face. It will not obstruct our policy of opening up to the outside. It will in fact benefit the implementation of that policy."⁴⁶ The cleanup issue in fact did not affect the policy of opening up.

On December 3, 1988, Zhao Ziyang, who succeeded Hu as secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party, met repatriated exemplary students in the Great Hall of the People and emphasized, "We must uphold our policy of sending students abroad."⁴⁷

Six months later, the June Fourth Incident broke out. The new generation of leaders on the political stage stated, on a variety of occasions, that the policy "would not change." On October 6, 1989, Secretary-General Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng met with returned students in Huairan Hall in the Zhongnanhai compound. Like his predecessor, Jiang said, "To send students to study in other countries was part of our policy of reform and opening up. It remains so."⁴⁸

In the decade since the mid-eighties there have been several political storms in China. Many students lived with the anxiety that the policy would be changed overnight and hence they would miss the last train. Many foreign observers also repeatedly predicted that the policy

would once more die young. Facts have shown, however, that the policy was carried out with consistency, a rather rare occurrence in China's history.

For more than ten years after China's opening up in the late 1970s, its policy on allowing students to study abroad had varied according to domestic politics. The strange circular dance consisted of alternately relaxing and tightening the control of the individual by the government and the work unit.⁴⁹ Today, now that society has begun to revolve around the economy, perhaps the policy can finally shed the ritualized circular dance and instead reflect the privileges and obligations of China's citizens.

THE PARTING SCENE

A colleague studying oil painting told me that he had an idea for a painting. Its title would be *Parting*. The canvas would show the front of an automobile heading toward the airport. Through the windshield one would see a student dressed in a suit. He would soon bid farewell to his family, for he was leaving for another country to study. The student would look thoughtfully through the car window. My colleague said he would like to paint those eyes, for they would reveal extraordinarily complex emotions—excitement, anxiety, reluctance to leave, a feeling of something amiss.

I do not know if my colleague ever completed his creative piece. He has since left China. I also do not know how he felt at his moment of parting. Life is often complex but rarely that romantic.⁵⁰

After all the work of getting their passports and visas, packing bags, and purchasing tickets, the departing students finally stood in line to have their tickets checked. The time had come to bid goodbye to family and friends. Soon they would leave their country behind and set foot in an unknown land in which they must battle for survival. What were they thinking?

"That was the most fulfilling moment of my life," said a twenty-eight-year-old student at the University of California at Berkeley. On that day his parents, two sisters, a brother-in-law, his uncle and aunt and their two children, and his girlfriend all came to say goodbye. He had a full scholarship to study physics at a

prestigious university. He knew that he was the pride of the family, and he had shaken up his classmates and the colleagues in his work unit. Everything happened so naturally that he could not say that it had been a battle or even a struggle. When he graduated from high school, the college entrance examination had been in use again for two years; he had not witnessed the sad, eerie sight of a desolate Peking University campus during the Cultural Revolution or experienced the idle passing of life in a commune. He simply sailed through the entrance examination and entered the University of Science and Technology. Four years later, he was admitted to Peking University as a graduate student. After completing his graduate studies, he worked in a research institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Just when he was thinking of taking the TOEFL and GRE, a professor from the University of California at Berkeley, who was interested in the same research field, visited the institute and showed strong interest in his work. A year later the professor made all the arrangements for him to come to Berkeley. "I wasn't nervous at all. I knew I would do all right. Look at my living quarters here, and my car. They're like those of a deputy minister in China," he said.

"I knew then that perhaps it would be our last embrace," said a twenty-five-year-old woman who went to Australia to study at a language school. On the day of their parting, her husband went to the airport with her. They had experienced numerous separations during their three years of marriage. They had met at a party when she was working in an art unit and he was an actor in a Beijing troupe. A friend brought him to her work unit and hence into her life. They fell in love at first sight and were married half a year later. But life after marriage was no longer romantic. Like many other couples in China, they had to live apart.⁵¹ During those three years of marriage, she took trains and buses and got rides between Beijing and Tianjin. This time, however, she knew the separation would not be short. She was leaving not just for a paper diploma but for a change in life. She did not wish, in her own words, "to live the harsh and trivial life of a small-city person." Fate seemed to have taken good care of her to have arranged that change. On a fateful autumn day, walking on fallen leaves, she went to the post office to mail her visa application to the Australian Embassy in Beijing. When she arrived, the last postal clerk was just locking up the office for the coming long weekend. She did not wish to delay the mailing and pleaded for help. The kind-hearted clerk reopened the door and posted her registered mail. A few days later the Australian Embassy announced new, stiffer rules for visas, but her application arrived just before the old rules expired. She received her visa. She said that at the airport, "my husband felt the same way, but he was unwilling to acknowledge it." Four years later she and her husband, who was still in China, completed their divorce proceedings.

“At the airport, I couldn’t help but curse. I know that wasn’t right, but I couldn’t bear it any more. Were it not for his irresponsible agitation, why would I have gone to faraway New Zealand?” She was referring to a male colleague. This thirty-nine-year-old divorced woman was a straightforward person with straightforward opinions. Before she went to New Zealand, she had been a reporter at a Beijing newspaper and was content with her work and proud of her accomplishments as a reporter. Covering news, writing, turning in dispatches, soliciting advertisements, and attending news conferences kept her busy; there was no time to think about going abroad. But the tide of people going abroad finally lapped up to their office. A colleague, who had always enjoyed working on colorful broadcasts about political intrigue and who seemed to have busied himself in attending every political gathering, appeared to have suddenly refocused his attention. He brought in all kinds of agitating new ideas. Seemingly more concerned about her than she was about herself, he would say, “Hurry up and do something! This is the last chance to go abroad!” She would answer, “At my age, why should I bother?” And he would respond, “Many older people are doing that.” With his encouragement, her heart stirred and her pulse quickened. First, she sold her books and furniture, gathering more than ¥10,000.⁵² Then she entrusted her four-year-old daughter to her mother, resigned from the newspaper, and devoted all her energy to going to New Zealand, the virgin land that had just opened up to Chinese students. At the airport she suddenly had doubts, but it was too late; there was no turning back.

Two years later, in a letter to her colleagues at the newspaper, she said she was caring for an elderly person in a rich family and was well paid. But, she said, “The old man has cancer and may not live long. The family members all wish him to die, the sooner the better. That way they can each collect their share of the inheritance. I’m the only person who wishes the old man to live. When he dies, I become unemployed. I’ll cry when the old man dies.”

As for me, the parting was neither sad nor romantic. On the way to the airport, I began to worry about unforeseen problems with my passport, visa, plane ticket, or luggage. Perhaps I wouldn’t be able to leave, and the whole dream of going abroad would be dashed at the last moment. These needless worries made me bid farewell hurriedly to my family. I then walked anxiously through the inspection hallway. After I passed passport and visa inspection, I sighed in relief. I turned back to look for my family at the other end of the hallway, but they had already left. At that instant, I felt I could no longer turn back. Passport, visa, and national boundaries, being so much more powerful than an individual, had led me away, for the first time, from friends and relatives, a familiar life, and a “motherland” of which I only had a vague concept learned from geography textbooks.⁵³

The plane took off, but my mind could not settle down. The plane leaving Beijing still had to stop in Shanghai. I reminded myself incessantly, "No, you haven't left yet."

After a brief stop, the plane took off again. This time, it left the country; it crossed the ocean; it headed toward the far shore.

When I loosened the seat belt, my mind relaxed, too. I knew it: now I was truly going to America.

But I did not know what kind of world was awaiting me.

TRANSLATOR'S ENDNOTE

A Personal Reflection on the Power of History

Most of us are citizens by reason of the simple serendipitous fact of our birth here.

—JUDGE JAMES A. PARKER

While reading the Chinese edition of Qian Ning's *Chinese Students Encounter America*, I was awed by the imprint of China's civilization on the social phenomenon known as "studying in America" in the last 150 years of Chinese history. I left mainland China with my family for Taiwan in 1949 at age sixteen and came to America to study in 1956. This endnote, which is about my life before I came to America, expresses my veneration for the power of history and hence explains why I translated this book.

I was born in Anhui, China, in 1933 and grew up in Nanjing (Nanking), then China's capital. One of my earliest memories is of being sheltered during the Nanjing Massacre, which took place when I was four. My parents, two older sisters, and I (my younger brother was not yet born) took refuge at Jinling Women's College, which was run by American missionaries. In the last four of the eight years of Japanese occupation, from 1937 to 1945, my family lived next to a Japanese civilian family. Having read very little of the history of conflict between China and Japan, I did not feel threatened by or hostile toward them. I studied Japanese in 1944 and 1945, as required by the Japanese occupier.

My grandmother came from a peasant family and was uneducated. Her feet were bound until the 1911 Nationalist Revolution. My grandfather taught himself to read and write and later became an herbal pharmacist. They scrimped to send my father, their eldest son, to Jinling University. But their second son, my uncle, was influenced by a wealthy distant cousin of his and became an opium addict at a young age. My mother had a few years of schooling, and could read more than she could write.

August 15, 1945, was a memorable day. On the way home after school, I heard Emperor Hirohito announce through loudspeakers that Japan would surrender unconditionally to the Allies. Although I did not comprehend the significance of the announcement, I had an inkling that this was important enough for me to run all the way home to my mother and tell her what I had heard.

The next two years were a happy time for me. The atmosphere of Japanese occupation and American bombing and leaflet dropping was replaced by the busy activities of the returning Chinese government and its American military advisers. The Americans rode in jeeps and, in wintertime, wore smart-looking leather jackets rather than a cotton-padded robe such as I wore. I saw movies featuring Johnny Weissmuller, Dorothy Lamour, and the hilarious pair Laurel and Hardy.

I knew the government was battling the Communists in the north, but I had never felt concerned. I did become familiar with some impressive-sounding American names, however: Albert Wedemeyer, Patrick Hurley, and George Marshall, the American mediators who were trying unsuccessfully to bring a negotiated settlement between the Nationalists and Communists.

Then inflation caused by financing the war against the Communists raged with gale force. One day in 1948 my father, who was employed by the Postal Savings and Remittances Bank (he also was a partner in a private bank and a textile factory), dug a small trench under the canopy of a sycamore tree in our front yard and buried a steel pipe two feet long by about four inches in diameter, with caps on both ends. Later he explained to me that the government would soon issue a new currency, "gold yuan," at the rate of one new yuan to three million old yuan. All privately held gold would have to be turned in to the central bank. The pipe contained gold bars that my father tried to hide from the government. (I have not seen the steel pipe since; I wonder if it and its contents are still there.) But soon the "gold yuan," too, became worthless,

and goods and services were again purchased with silver dollars minted at the turn of the nineteenth century.

As the Communists continued their southward advance in the fall of 1948, my family packed up our cotton-padded bedrolls, pots, and pans to prepare for a 1,000-mile flight to the south. The eight-month stop-and-go trip was an exciting adventure for me. I rode on a train for the first time, and traveled through the battlegrounds of valorous generals who had lived at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 C.E.). But on our journey we stayed in dark houses with mud walls and thatched roofs similar to the ones owned by the peasants. We were sometimes street vendors, selling our clothing and cookware to lighten our load. My first sale brought in three dollars for a pair of flannel pajamas. The thrill of hearing the ringing silver overpowered my embarrassment at having to squat on the sidewalk as a peddler.

One summer morning in Guangzhou in 1949, before the Communist takeover of the mainland, we fled on the last ship to Taiwan on which my father's employer had reserved bunks to evacuate its employees and their families. I felt sad as I said goodbye to the one-room apartment we had lived in for the previous two months. In contrast to the mud huts we had become accustomed to, it was bright and airy, with a high ceiling; it had been a bedroom in a stone house in Guangzhou's old French Concession.

Hurriedly we unloaded our belongings from a truck to a sampan on a sandy bank of the Huangpu River to reach the ocean-faring ship, which was anchored in deep water. Halfway to the ship, which was about as far from the bank as the Statue of Liberty is from Ellis Island, a gunman in another sampan approached us and diverted our boat to a remote marsh. The three bandits searched our belongings for about eight hours, leisurely picnicking on my family's stock of canned ham from America and on biscuits, candies, and my father's favorite cigarettes (Three Five brand) from England. These items were precious; China's canned-food industry was practically nonexistent at that time. What the bandits could not consume on the spot, they took with them. Finally, at dark, we were released and given \$20 for travel money. All the while, I was thinking about the marsh bandits of the Song dynasty (960–1279) who were romanticized in the adventure stories of which I was fond.

At the time of the robbery, my two elder sisters were no longer with the family. Two months earlier, my eldest sister, who had introduced me to literature translated from English and Russian, had been nudged

into a hasty marriage. On the morning after her wedding, I saw her, in tears, recede out of sight forever as the train carrying the family off to Guangzhou pulled away from the station. The logic of the wedding was the same as that of selling the pots and pans we had brought from Nanjing: to lighten the family load. Two weeks before that wedding, my second-eldest sister had run away to escape a similar fate. (Years later she rejoined the family in Taiwan. My eldest sister later committed suicide because her spirit had been broken by the discovery that her husband already had a wife from a "cradle marriage"; her body had been broken by the famine resulting from the Great Leap Forward. In Taiwan my father was laid off from the dissolved bank and, ever resourceful, supported the family by nightly winnings at poker. He died of a stroke when he was sixty, and my mother died soon after of loneliness.)

It took an hour to row to the ship after the bandits released us. I was worried that the ship would not wait for us and I would not be able to go to Taiwan, the island known to me by its folk hero Zheng Chenggong, who, history says, fought off the Dutch in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). But the ship was still there, and I was happy again.

In Taiwan I completed high school and college. One of the most exciting events of college was to see some of my classmates leave for Korea to work for the American military as interpreters in interrogations of the POWs from the Resist-America, Aid-Korea Volunteer Army of the People's Republic of China. I, too, wanted to join but was discouraged by my parents. These classmates returned with seemingly limitless American dollars to spend. They talked mostly among themselves, drank openly, laughed loudly, and spoke of visiting prostitutes. Their un-Chinese behavior puzzled me. None of them talked about the POWs, and no student in the college seemed to be interested in that subject either.

In 1956 I came to America and have remained ever since; my brother came a few years later. I studied engineering in graduate school, worked at odd jobs, got married, found work doing research in physics, became the father of two children, and retired in 1994.

In December 1997 I visited the Academy of Sciences and Tsinghua University in Beijing and chanced to read *Chinese Students Encounter America*. I felt like Emily Webb in *Our Town*, who, after her death, was given the opportunity to see what had happened in her life.

It is easy for me and other international students from poor or warring countries to recognize elements of our own lives in the stories

documented in *Chinese Students Encounter America*: freedom from the threat of war, the serenity and majesty of the open spaces, bewildering material abundance, the dizzying choices available in everyday life, the pressure of schoolwork and survival, the brutality of the culture of acquisitiveness. Where we differ is in the lives we left behind: Chinese students who came to America in the eighties and nineties had lived in China during Land Reform and the Cultural Revolution—a life my family would have lived had we, on that fateful day in Guangzhou, failed to get out of China. Had the bandits delayed us longer, had the ship left without us, then the name of my father, who owned farmland in Anhui, would certainly have been listed in Taiwan's newspapers among the landlords killed during Land Reform; I myself might have arrived one day in the early eighties on an American campus as a middle-aged visiting scholar from the People's Republic of China, speaking halting English; my children might have been among the boisterous students demonstrating in Tiananmen Square in 1989, or among the screaming Red Guards who beat their school principals, broke Ming-dynasty vases, and smashed Western violins more than a decade earlier. But China's millennia-old civilization, which passed on to modern Chinese the twin legacies of unyielding poverty at home and weakness among nations, and unmet longing for prosperity and equality, would have eventually swept my children to campuses in Berkeley, Ann Arbor, or Madison as they swept me to America from Taiwan.

We act out our roles according to the script of history, wherever, whenever, and whoever we happen to be. The script can change only after old forces are spent and new forces are born. Both the dissipation of the old and the creation of the new requires an open education for the young.

T. K. CHU
Princeton, New Jersey
June 30, 2000

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