

Resource Hub for U.S. Academic Travel to China US-China Education Trust

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This Resource Hub is designed to provide clear, practical guidance for Americans who are planning or considering academic travel to China, including students, scholars, faculty, and others working in educational or research settings. Our aim is to assemble reliable context, vetted opportunities, and lessons from recent travelers so visitors can understand current conditions and make informed choices about study, research, and collaboration in China. While others may find these materials useful, the Hub is specifically designed to support those traveling for academic and educational purposes and focuses on the social sciences and humanities fields as opposed to business, personal, or STEM-focused pursuits.

This Resource Hub is designed to provide grounded information so travelers can make well-informed decisions about travel. This guidance has been compiled based on the best practices of scholars, students, and institutions involved in such academic travel since 2020. These materials are for reference only and should be used in the context of guidance from your home institution, official travel guidance, and your own personal circumstances.

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Section 1 - Academic travel: What you need to know

Academic travel to China today

Academic travel to China has resumed following the pandemic and remains possible, but it differs in important ways from earlier eras of exchange. Students, researchers, families, and institutions planning a visit today should approach the process with clear expectations about the opportunities and the constraints.

This section is intended to provide an orientation to the current environment, not as an exhaustive rulebook, and not as an argument for or against travel. The goal is simply to describe the landscape as contributors to this document evaluate it, so travelers can assess feasibility, plan responsibly, and make decisions that fit their own circumstances.

Travelers should also seek out any available information on current conditions, including from their home institution, their intended host institution in China, and, if possible, from individuals who have recently pursued similar opportunities.

Academic Openness

Today, China's academic environment is more restrictive than in the past, particularly around politically sensitive, military, or national security topics. Ethical awareness and discretion are important. It is also important to note that content formally delivered to students or public audiences across China by foreign faculty is likely to receive more scrutiny than English language content intended for foreign audiences.

Constraints on academic subject matter are real, but they are not always predictable from afar, and being on the ground can reveal pathways forward that are difficult to anticipate remotely. Preparation, flexibility, and local context matter more than sweeping conclusions.

How does the climate today differ from previous norms?

Academic exchange with China expanded rapidly during the 2000s and early 2010s, when research access and institutional collaboration was generally more open and less structured. Today's environment is shaped less by a single policy shift than by a changed geopolitical baseline.

On the positive side, senior-level political signaling continues to affirm the value of people-to-people exchange. At the November 2023 APEC meeting, [Xi Jinping announced a goal of welcoming 50,000 Americans to China over five years](#), accompanied by renewed diplomatic and institutional support for educational and cultural exchanges on the U.S. side. This reflects a shared recognition that sustained engagement remains strategically important, even amid broader competition.

At the same time, the challenges are more structural and attitudinal. Heightened geopolitical rivalry has produced greater mutual skepticism toward individuals, particularly researchers, journalists, and professionals operating across borders. Research topics are more readily framed through national security lenses, and institutions on both sides face stronger incentives to manage risk, reputational exposure, and compliance. These dynamics shape collaboration norms even in the absence of explicit restrictions.

Overall, the current moment is best understood as more structured and uneven: political support for exchange exists alongside deeper caution about who participates, on what terms, and in

which areas, making today's environment neither categorically closed nor a return to earlier eras of engagement.

What does research say about today's climate?

Survey-based research by Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Rory Truex ([2020](#), [2024](#)) provides one of the clearest empirical pictures of the current research environment. Drawing on responses from more than 500 China scholars, they find that overtly repressive experiences are uncommon but real, and that constraints more often take the form of barriers to access rather than direct confrontation.

For example:

- 26% of scholars conducting archival research reported being denied access
- 5% reported difficulty obtaining a visa
- About 9% reported being “invited to tea” for questioning

Importantly, Greitens and Truex note that uncertainty and ambiguity shape behavior as much as formal restrictions. Boundaries are often communicated indirectly through local contacts, uneven enforcement, or shifting institutional expectations rather than through explicit rules.

More recent scholarship reinforces this picture. New empirical research on international academic collaboration shows that [institutional barriers such as visa regimes have measurable effects on research mobility and collaboration](#), even absent overt political intervention. A 2025 working paper finds that easing visa restrictions is associated with significant increases in Sino-foreign research collaboration, underscoring how access conditions operate as structural constraints on engagement.

This pattern is consistent with broader analyses of governance in China, including *Outsourcing Repression* by Lynette Ong, which argues that state power is often exercised indirectly through intermediaries, incentives, and informal pressures rather than through visible repression.

Research and reporting also suggest that [these challenges are unevenly distributed](#). Scholars of Chinese heritage, dual nationals, or those with close family ties in China often report heightened risk sensitivity and greater exposure to informal scrutiny, particularly when working on topics deemed by Chinese authorities to be “politically sensitive.” Although systematic data remain limited, emerging work indicates that identity and perceived affiliation can shape vulnerability in subtle but consequential ways. There are cases in which the knowledge of a researcher's affiliation with Western institutions would discourage or mute prospective participants from joining the study.

What barriers and risks should academic travelers understand?

The most common challenges academic travelers encounter today are a combination of structural constraints and everyday administrative realities.

These can include:

- Shifting local enforcement and the potential for overly broad interpretation of local laws
- Unclear boundaries around what the Chinese government perceives to be sensitive topics
- Uneven access to archives, institutions, or field sites
- Institutional compliance requirements, including data handling and partnership review
- Ethical responsibility to protect colleagues, interlocutors, and participants in China
- Practical adjustment barriers, such as payment systems, phone access, and registration rules

For many travelers, the most disruptive challenges arise not from political or security scrutiny but from navigating the logistics of daily life. China-based institutions that work closely with inbound students emphasize that immigration questioning is rare and that entry is smooth in the vast majority of cases when documentation aligns with the purpose of travel.

Risk varies significantly depending on a traveler's profile, activities, field of research, and institutional affiliations. Work touching governance, security, ethnic policy, or activism may elicit closer scrutiny than other topics, and travelers should be thoughtful about how research is framed and communicated, particularly online.

Individuals should assess risk based on their own personal circumstances. Some risk groups include dissidents and their families, businesspeople with outstanding legal cases in China, and individuals or organizations who have been sanctioned by China. Though [China has reportedly used exit bans and related movement restrictions in ways that can be opaque and difficult to predict. instances of academics being subject to exit bans are rare.](#) It should also be noted that China does not recognize dual citizenship and will treat a Chinese passport holder as a Chinese citizen, subject to domestic law enforcement. The passport on which a dual citizen enters the country can also matter.

How will spending time in China affect future security clearance processes?

Having spent time in China does not automatically disqualify you from obtaining a national security clearance from the U.S. government, though it may add time and complexity to the process. Part of the adjudicative process includes verifying whether – based on all available, reliable information about that individual, including jobs, places of residence, and contacts from the time abroad – the individual poses an acceptable security risk to U.S. national security interests. It can be hard to verify this in China. If you wish to work for the U.S. government in the future, there are some steps you can take in advance to facilitate an easier process:

- Account for all time spent in China with specific dates, locations, and purposes of travel or residence. Whenever possible, provide American points of contact – such as professors, supervisors, colleagues, or friends – who can verify your whereabouts and activities during your time abroad. Additional processing time is added when investigators are unable to reach contacts abroad to confirm your stated activities.

- Retain all relevant documentation that can help verify your activities, including academic transcripts, travel itineraries, visa records, and employment records.
- Avoid any activities that could raise red flags: do not accept large sums of money or gifts, obey local laws, maintain transparency about all relationships and contacts, and report any approaches by foreign nationals seeking information or offering unusual opportunities.
- Track and clarify all financial activities and relationships with entities in China, including sources of funding, opening and maintaining bank accounts in China, etc.
- If you currently maintain an active clearance, please check with your current institution about relevant procedures or guidance for travel.

Contingent on the purpose of the visit to China and the subject matter being researched, students or researchers may face scrutiny and obstacles in the adjudicative process of obtaining national security eligibility (clearance) upon their return from China. Despite concerns associated with spending time in China, many individuals who serve in the U.S. government have spent meaningful time in China, which advances their ability to do their job.

If you have specific concerns about the process, consider speaking with a professional contact who has gone through the process and can share their experience. If you have further questions, you can also consult the unclassified [National Security Adjudicative Guidelines for Determining Eligibility for Access to Classified Information or Eligibility to Hold a Sensitive Position](#), for specific information about the process and the guidelines with which an affirmative determination is made.

Key takeaways

- Information should be triangulated from multiple sources including an academic traveler's home institution, host institution, and recent experiences. Travelers should also consult the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory on China.
- Academic travel to China remains possible, but the environment is more structured and politically sensitive than in earlier eras of exchange.
- Constraints are often experienced as uneven access, administrative complexity, and uncertainty rather than uniform repression.
- The decision to travel depends on individual circumstances, research goals, institutional guidance, and personal risk tolerance.

Section 2 - Current opportunities: Programs and funding

Even as academic travel to China has become more structured and sometimes more administratively complex, a range of credible, well-run pathways for study, language training, research, and professional development remain. This section is designed to help prospective travelers understand what options exist today, how they differ, and what kinds of support and funding can make participation more feasible.

What pathways remain?

Most U.S. travelers who study or conduct research in China today do so through structured programs with clear institutional sponsorship. In many cases, these pathways are more stable and administratively supported than fully independent travel.

Common formats include:

Short-term opportunities (weeks to months)

- Study tours and academic delegations organized by an American academic institution and/or a Chinese academic host
- Short-term cultural immersion and intensive language programs
- University-hosted coursework or exchanges
- Independent fieldwork or research trips

These programs tend to be highly structured and are often the most accessible entry point for first-time travelers.

Medium-term opportunities (semester to one year)

- Semester exchanges linked to U.S. degree programs
- Partner-campus study (including joint-venture universities)
- Academic internships or thematic programs combining coursework with field exposure

These options typically provide strong on-the-ground support, including help with housing, registration, and daily-life logistics.

Long-term opportunities (one year or more)

- Degree study at Chinese universities
- Graduate research fellowships with host sponsorship
- Specialized training programs requiring prior China experience or defined research agendas

Long-term pathways generally involve additional administrative steps, such as residence permits, health exams, and local registration procedures.

In operational terms, many institutions report that visa processing for U.S. citizens has become significantly more streamlined since 2023, with reduced documentation requirements and walk-in application appointments now common. This has lowered some barriers to participation, even as other constraints remain.

How should travelers choose among programs?

Opportunities differ not only by length but also by structure, funding source, and academic purpose. When evaluating programs, travelers may find it helpful to consider:

1. Academic Focus

Language-focused: These programs are often the most straightforward pathway for supported academic travel to China. These programs tend to be highly structured, with built-in support systems and set course schedules. Some programs allow for group or independent travel before or after the program.

Coursework on China: Some programs are centered on studying China academically rather than conducting independent research or focusing primarily on language acquisition. These classroom-based programs offer coursework in fields such as policy, economics, history, or international relations, often in partnership with Chinese universities. They provide an immersive academic environment while maintaining a structured, degree-linked format.

Research-oriented: Research will require more advanced planning, institutional affiliations, and sensitivity to topic areas. These pathways are typically best suited for students with defined research agendas or prior China experience.

Funding pathways and cost considerations

Some programs are supported primarily by U.S. universities or philanthropic funders, while others involve Chinese institutional or government-linked support.

Many travelers participate successfully in both types of arrangements, but it is important to understand:

- What reporting or compliance requirements apply on the U.S. side
- Whether Chinese funding introduces additional expectations or visibility
- How the program is perceived by home and host institutions

Transparency and institutional guidance are especially important for graduate researchers. Cost is one of the biggest barriers, especially as institutional budgets tighten. A range of funding sources exists, but students should evaluate each carefully before accepting support.

When assessing any opportunity, consider both U.S.- and Chinese-based funding sources critically. Key questions to ask may include:

- Who is the funder, and are they clearly identified?
- What are their goals, priorities, and objectives in supporting this program?
- Will the funder have any influence over my work, studies, or findings?
- Are there explicit or implicit restrictions attached to this funding?
- Could this funding source affect my future career prospects or institutional standing?

Available funding typically includes:

- Scholarships offered directly by host institutions or exchange providers
- U.S.-based fellowships focused on language study, area studies, or public service
- University travel or research grants administered through departments or study-abroad offices
- Private foundation awards supporting China-related research and training
- Funding from Chinese government sponsored programs seeking to encourage more American travel to China like [Young Envoys Scholars](#) (YES), corporations, and institutions

Some U.S. institutions view funding originating from Chinese government sources with scrutiny, and many have explicit restrictions on support associated with Chinese government-backed talent programs. Before accepting any funding, it is your responsibility to conduct due diligence and ensure compliance with your home institution's policies.

Some awards can be layered, but requirements differ, and deadlines often fall months in advance. Prospective travelers should begin funding conversations early, especially for long-term research stays.

How do pathways differ for humanities vs. social science researchers?

Differences in disciplines matter in practice.

Humanities researchers (focused on history, literature, archival work, etc.) often face uneven access: archives may be open in one location but restricted in another, and availability can shift without a clear explanation.

Social science researchers, especially those conducting interviews or fieldwork, may encounter additional ethical and institutional considerations. Human subject research, data handling, and the protection of local interlocutors often require more careful planning and clearer safeguards.

In both cases, travelers benefit from flexibility in research design.

Programs currently operating

Despite reduced numbers overall, several programs continue to welcome American participants and maintain strong academic standards.

Examples include:

- University-based language and immersion programs in major cities
- Graduate fellowships that base scholars in China while connecting them to global networks
- Academic exchanges through partner campuses and joint-venture universities
- Professional or thematic programs linking coursework with policy, development, or regional study

We maintain a running list of currently operating programs with links, eligibility details, and timelines. View: [USCET Active Programs & Funding Opportunities Database](#)

Section 3 - Operational toolkit

This section is designed to offer practical guidance related to travel, logistics, and common questions related to travel in China today. This guidance has been compiled based on the best practices of scholars, students, and institutions involved in such academic travel since 2020. These materials are for reference only and should be used in the context of guidance from your home institution, official travel guidance, and your own personal circumstances.

Legal Status of U.S. Citizens in China

U.S. citizens traveling or residing in China are subject to Chinese law. U.S. laws do not apply overseas, and the U.S. government cannot override local legal processes without significant political involvement/pressure.

If a U.S. citizen is arrested or detained, consular officials can:

- Request access to visit the detainee, though access can vary enormously depending on the charge
- Provide a list of local attorneys
- Help notify family members if requested
- Monitor the case to ensure the individual is treated according to domestic and international law

However, consular officers cannot:

- Secure release from detention
- Intervene in court proceedings
- Provide legal representation
- Pay legal fees or fines

The legal system and procedures in China differ significantly from those in the U.S. Bail is uncommon in many cases, pre-trial detention periods can be lengthy, and procedural standards do not mirror U.S. criminal justice norms.

For academic travelers, the most effective risk mitigation strategy is straightforward: comply fully with local laws and avoid activities that create unnecessary legal exposure. As one example, cannabis is illegal in China and is a serious offense. Even small amounts can lead to detention, fines, or deportation. U.S. state-level legalization and medical prescriptions do not apply overseas. Academic travelers should not bring or use cannabis or cannabis-related products while in China.

Entry, exit, and visas

Entry, exit, and visa requirements are often a primary source of questions for travelers to China. China's system is structured and documentation-driven, and requirements vary depending on visa type, institutional affiliation, and length of stay.

Travelers should review official consular guidance and confirm instructions with their home institution and host institution. The most important step is ensuring that the visa category, supporting documents, and planned activities are fully aligned. Careful preparation and attention to detail are essential to maintaining compliance before and during your stay.

In recent years, China's visa process has also become significantly more streamlined, with simpler application requirements and expanded transit options. That being said, the Chinese Online Visa Application (COVA) requires a great deal of detailed – and some might say invasive – information (travel history over recent years, employment and education history, etc.), so travelers need to set aside adequate time for preparing that information.

This page provides practical guidance for students, scholars, and short-term academic visitors on how to enter China smoothly, stay in compliance while in-country, and avoid common logistical surprises.

Basic requirements for travel

- Confirm that your visa or entry status matches your purpose of travel
- Ensure that your passport is valid for the required period following your arrival in country
- Keep digital and paper copies of key documents with you when you travel (passport, visa, invitation letters)
- Understand local registration requirements after arrival
- Plan ahead for residence permits if staying long-term
- Know what to expect at immigration and departure checkpoints
- Enroll in STEP and save U.S. Embassy/Consulate contact information before departure

STEP and temporary residence registration

U.S. citizens traveling to China, whether for study, research, or academic exchange, may find it helpful to enroll in the **Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP)**, a free service run by the U.S. State Department.

STEP allows travelers to:

- Receive updated security and consular messages while abroad
- Make it easier for the U.S. Embassy or Consulates to contact you in an emergency
- Help family members reach you through official channels if needed

While STEP does not prevent travel disruptions, it is a simple step that can improve preparedness and communication during overseas stays.

Under [China's Exit and Entry Administration Law](#), all foreign nationals must register their place of residence with the local public security authorities within 24 hours of arriving at a new address. This requirement applies to all non-Chinese passport holders, including residents of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, regardless of whether they are in China for short-term visits (such as tourism or business) or longer-term stays for study, work, or family reasons.

In practice, hotels and university dormitories typically complete this registration automatically at check-in. However, individuals staying in private residences, including with friends or family, must complete the process themselves, either through a local government app (where available) or in person at the neighborhood police station.

Because Chinese citizens are not subject to this requirement, local hosts may not always be aware of its importance. Nevertheless, compliance is essential. Failure to register can create administrative complications. For example, students applying to convert an X1 visa into a residence permit cannot proceed without proof of registration. Travelers using short-term visa-free transit arrangements may also face fines or delays upon departure if registration was not completed properly.

Visas and key documents

Since 2023, visa processing for U.S. citizens has become more streamlined, including walk-in submission at consulates, reduced fees, and continued availability of 10-year multiple-entry visas.

Most academic travelers enter China under one of the following visa arrangements:

- **X1 Student Visa (Long-Term Study):** For degree programs or study periods longer than 180 days. Travelers typically convert this visa into a residence permit shortly after arrival.

Converting a Student Visa to a Residence Permit for Study over 180 days

After arrival, students do the following:

1. Obtain a local temporary residence registration.
2. Complete a medical examination at a designated travel clinic.
3. Submit a residence permit application at the local exit-entry administration (PSB) using passport, visa, health exam record, housing registration, photos, and school documents, and pay a several-hundred-RMB fee by Chinese payment methods (Alipay, WeChat Pay, or local bank card).

During processing (often about 15 business days), the passport is held, and a receipt is used as ID for domestic travel and hotel check-in; it cannot be used to exit mainland China.

- **X2 Student Visa (Short-Term Study):** For study or exchange programs lasting less than 180 days. This visa usually covers the full stay without requiring a residence permit conversion.
- **F Visa (Exchange and Academic Visits):** Often used for short-term academic exchanges, research visits, or institutional travel that does not fall under formal degree study.

Your host university or program sponsor is the best source of guidance on which category applies to your specific travel purpose and may be able to help with the process.

A note on visa-free transit for short academic visits

The 240-hour (10-day) visa-free transit scheme, implemented by China in December 2024, permits short visits for tourism, business, family visits, and exchange activities. This may cover certain study tours or short institutional visits. It does not apply to long-term study, formal research stays, or employment, which require the appropriate visa.

Visa-free transit requires confirmed onward travel to a third country or region. The country of departure and the next destination cannot be the same; Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan qualify as third regions.

Voices within the academic community are divided on the use of visa-free transit for structured programs. Some view it as a practical option for short visits, while others prefer the additional documentation and institutional clarity that accompany a formal visa. It is not recommended to express that travel is for one purpose while intending it for another purpose.

Read more about this option here:

- [240-Hour Visa-Free in China: 10-Day Visa-Free Transit 2026](#)
- [China 240-Hour \(10 Days\) Visa-Free Transit](#)

What are “key documents”?

Academic travelers should keep digital and paper copies of the materials commonly requested during visa processing, arrival, or residence registration.

Key documents may include:

- Your passport (and visa or entry permission page)
- An official admission or acceptance notice from your host institution
- An invitation letter from your university or sponsoring organization
- Required study documentation (such as the **JW202 form** for long-term students)
- Local address and emergency contact information for your host program

Having these accessible (even offline or printed) can prevent unnecessary stress if questions arise during entry or early registration.

Arrival and immigration

On arrival, you should be prepared to:

- Present your passport and visa (or transit documentation).
- State your purpose and length of travel clearly and consistently.
- Show contact information for your host institution if asked.
- Complete the China Arrival Card before landing. A digital option went online in 2025:
 - Embassy website introduction: https://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/lsfw/zj/notice/202512/t20251203_11765346.htm
 - NIA Entry Card Direct Link: <https://s.nia.gov.cn/ArrivalCardFillingPC/entry-registration-home>
 - Good guide for the card: <https://travelchinawith.me/china-facts/china-digital-arrival-card-guide/>
- Provide the required biometric data (fingerprints and a photo), which is collected from all incoming foreign visitors as part of immigration procedures.
- If staying in a private residence, registration must be completed at a local police station (or via an app, depending on the city). Failure to register can create complications later, especially for students applying for residence permits.

Departure, exit, and exit bans

Departures from China are normally straightforward. However, outbound checks may include:

- Review of prohibited items or cultural relics
- Enforcement of cash limits
- Verification of registration compliance

There are well-documented cases of individuals being prevented from leaving China, typically involving outstanding legal disputes or high-profile political circumstances. However, available evidence suggests that these cases do not affect typical students or short-term academic visitors.

Travelers who want additional official context should consult the [U.S. State Department's China Travel Advisory](#) and relevant security guidance, particularly if their work involves sensitive affiliations or legal complexity.

Additional Resources:

- [Welcome Guide to China](#) (National Immigration Administration)
- [Temporary Residence Registration in China – A Guide for Foreign Residents and Visitors](#)
- [China Exit Bans: You Can Check Out Any Time You Want, But You Can't Ever Leave](#)
- [China: Right to Leave Country Further Restricted](#)

Frequently Asked Questions on entry, exit, and visas

How do I know if I'm applying for the "right" visa?

The right visa is the one that matches what you are actually doing in China. Your host university or program sponsor is the best authority on this and should guide you. When your visa category, invitation letters, and activities align, the process is typically straightforward.

Do I really need to register my address after arrival?

Yes. All foreign visitors must register their residence shortly after arrival. Hotels do this automatically; private housing requires registration at a local police station or through an app. This is one of the most common logistical steps and one of the easiest to handle early.

What is a residence permit, and who needs one?

Students staying longer than 180 days typically convert an X1 visa into a residence permit after arrival. This is a standard administrative process handled with help from the host institution. During processing, passports are usually held temporarily, and travelers receive a receipt in the meantime.

Do I need to worry about filling out the COVA visa form and sharing my personal information?

It's normal to feel uneasy about providing detailed personal information on a visa application. The COVA (the Chinese Online Visa Application) form asks for more structure and detail than some travelers expect. That said, completing COVA is a standard part of the Chinese visa process and thousands of U.S. travelers, students, and scholars fill it out each year without issue.

If you are unsure how to describe your activities (for example, research vs. coursework), your host university or program sponsor is the best source of guidance.

It's also worth noting that identity verification is not limited to the visa stage. Like many countries, China collects biometric data (fingerprints and a photo) from incoming foreign visitors at the border as part of its standard immigration procedures. This process is mandatory for entry and applies broadly to foreign travelers, with limited exceptions such as diplomatic passport holders.

What happens if I have an issue at the border?

For students and academic visitors with the correct visa and documents, entry into China is routine. If an issue comes up, it most often means being asked a few extra questions or waiting briefly while an officer reviews your paperwork.

In practice, this usually looks like:

- Clarifying your purpose of travel

- Confirming your host institution or invitation
- Waiting while documents are checked

These situations are typically resolved on the spot when your visa, documents, and stated activities align.

Common visa situations that work in practice

- **Most students (semester or year long programs):**
 - X1 or X2 student visa
 - Host university provides admission notice and supporting documents
 - Hotel or campus housing handles address registration
 - Residence permit processed with university assistance (for X1)
- **Short-term academic visitors (weeks to a few months):**
 - F visa
 - Clear invitation letter from host institution
 - Hotel or campus housing handles address registration
 - No residence permit required
- **Faculty or researchers with defined institutional affiliations:**
 - Visa arranged with explicit host sponsorship
 - Invitation letter from Chinese host institution
 - Careful alignment between stated research purpose and activities
 - Address registration in each location

These examples are illustrative, not prescriptive, and reflect how academic travelers successfully navigate entry and legal status today.

Money, banking, and mobile payments

China operates largely on mobile payments. Since 2023, it has become easier to [link foreign bank cards to Alipay or WeChat Pay](#), allowing students to pay for daily expenses digitally.

Using Foreign Bank Cards: Foreign credit cards are not widely accepted directly at smaller businesses, even in major cities. Large hotels typically accept them. Most students rely on linking a foreign card to a mobile payment app and keeping some RMB available for initial expenses.

Initial Cash Needs: Students should arrive with access to approximately 1,400–1,800 RMB to cover early costs such as health exams, residence permit fees, transportation, SIM setup, and food. Exact needs vary by city and travel patterns.

Using ATMs: Major banks (Bank of China, ICBC, Agricultural Bank of China, China Construction Bank) generally accept Visa and Mastercard debit cards. Withdrawal limits apply. Notify your home bank before travel to prevent fraud blocks.

Banking Fees: Foreign-linked mobile payments may incur international transaction fees (often around 3% for larger transactions), and annual spending limits may apply. Long-term students may wish to use fee-reimbursing international checking accounts to reduce ATM and foreign transaction fees.

Technology, data protection, and digital life in China

Digital safety is one of the most common concerns for people preparing to travel to China. At the same time, not everyone faces the same risks, and not all precautions make sense for every traveler. The most effective way to think about digital safety is to start by asking what you are actually worried about, and why.

This page focuses on helping you understand China's digital environment, make proportional choices, and avoid unnecessary fear, while taking sensible, informed precautions where appropriate.

Which best describes you?

Not all guidance applies equally to everyone. Start with the option that best reflects your situation.

Most students and short-term visitors:	Researchers and interview-based engagements:	Sensitive access or affiliations:
You are studying language, culture, or another non-sensitive subject, participating in a short-term program, or visiting China without access to sensitive information. → What this means: You likely face low digital risk and do not need extreme precautions.	You are conducting interviews, surveys, or other research involving human subjects, or storing notes, recordings, or transcripts. → What this means: You may need to think more carefully about data storage and protecting the people you interact with.	You work with sensitive government, corporate, laboratory, or technical information, or have formal security obligations. → What this means: Stronger digital separation may be appropriate, often guided by your employer or institution.

Key Realities to Know Up Front

- You cannot successfully navigate China without using WeChat and Alipay.
- Most monitoring is automated and not specifically targeted at students.
- Extreme digital precautions are unnecessary for most travelers.

Understanding these realities helps you focus on what actually matters.

Common technology situations that work in practice

- **Most students:** One phone, standard personal accounts, WeChat and Alipay for daily use.
- **Two-phone setup:** A Chinese SIM or phone for local services, plus a U.S. phone with roaming data for familiar apps.
- **Multiple SIMs on one phone setup:** a combination of two or more eSIMs or physical SIM cards installed on one phone, device permitting.
- **Higher-sensitivity situations:** Separate devices, limited accounts, and careful data handling, often guided by institutional rules.

These examples are not prescriptions but illustrations of how travelers balance practicality and caution. The National Science Foundation has compiled comprehensive travel technology checklists and other helpful resources, which can be accessed here:

<https://www.secure-center.org/products>.

Frequently Asked Questions on technology, data protection, and digital life in China

What apps should I download before entering China?

At a minimum, academic travelers should plan to have:

- **VPN** — Set up a VPN (or Virtual Private Network) before you arrive so you can access apps and sites inaccessible behind the Great Firewall, like Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. Students studying abroad in China should identify what institutional VPN tools their home universities offer and other foreign scholars for their recommendations. Before arrival, they should install and test the VPN on all devices they intend to bring and hope to use. However, it can be helpful to prepare alternative options, as it is common for institutional VPNs to not function properly in China. Keep in mind that, officially, it is illegal to use unapproved VPNs.
- **WeChat (微信 Wēixìn)** – China’s essential messaging app, used for everyday communications with classmates, hosts, and local contacts, as well as payments and e-commerce. WeChat is subject to government surveillance.
- **Alipay (支付宝 Zhīfùbǎo)** – The most widely used payment app, often easier to set up than WeChat Pay for foreign visitors, and useful for arranging transit/taxis and paying for daily purchases.
- **Didi (滴滴出行 Dīdīchūxíng)** – The Uber of China, used for calling taxis and ridesharing. Be sure you download the version called “DiDi: Ride Hailing in China,” as other regional versions will not work in Mainland China. Alipay is also host to a basic DiDi program.
- **Pleco** – Best Chinese-English dictionary app; works offline and has handwriting input.
- **A connectivity plan (SIM or eSIM)** – Many travelers rely on a Chinese SIM after arrival, but if your phone is eSIM-only (or you want data immediately upon landing), you may

need to plan ahead with a travel eSIM option. Note: If your phone is on a payment plan, it is likely carrier-locked, preventing the installation of a new eSIM.

See additional explainers here:

- [“How to Use eSIM in China: WeChat, Alipay and Train Tickets”](#) (Aug 2025)
- [“How to Use WeChat”](#) (Feb 2025)

Do I need to bring a “clean” or “burner” phone or laptop to China?

For most students and short-term visitors, no. Bringing a “clean” device, one with new accounts and no access to your regular email or cloud services, is only necessary for a small subset of travelers who handle sensitive government, corporate, or research information.

Full device separation is effective but highly disruptive and often impractical for students due to authentication requirements and daily academic needs.

How should I think about digital risk before deciding what precautions to take?

Start by asking yourself what information you actually have that you are concerned about, and who would realistically want access to it. Digital precautions only make sense relative to your personal situation. Threat modeling helps avoid unnecessary steps while still allowing you to protect what matters.

Are there middle-ground options if I’m concerned but don’t want full device separation?

Yes. Some travelers choose practical middle-ground steps, such as:

- Using a temporary or secondary email account while in China
- Forwarding messages selectively during the travel period
- Keeping particularly sensitive accounts accessible only on a device you keep with you

It is also important to recognize that total control over devices is not realistic if you are living in China for an extended period.

Will I need a Chinese phone number?

Yes. If you are staying more than a short visit, a Chinese phone number is required for residence permit procedures, immigration SMS verification, and financial app setup.

Can I successfully navigate China without using any Chinese apps, like WeChat?

No. WeChat is essential for daily life in China, including communication and payments. Alipay is also widely used.

Is WeChat monitored?

You should assume that communications on Chinese platforms are accessible to authorities and that monitoring is often automated and keyword-based rather than personalized. Illegal activity and highly sensitive discussions should never occur on these platforms.

Should I use encrypted messaging apps like Signal?

For most everyday conversations, encrypted messaging is unnecessary. These tools may make sense if you need higher confidentiality for specific communications, but they add complexity and are not necessary for most students. Note that Signal is currently blocked in China and only accessible via VPN.

Should I bring my U.S. phone, or get a second phone?

Many travelers find it helpful to use two phones:

- A Chinese phone or SIM for local services like WeChat, Alipay, and transportation
- A U.S.-based phone with roaming data to maintain access to familiar apps without relying on a VPN, and other devices on its hotspot will also have the same access-

This setup is primarily about convenience and continuity, not heightened security.

Will my Gmail or other U.S. services work in China?

Some U.S.-based services, including Gmail, do not work without a VPN. Many travelers rely on roaming data from a U.S. phone to maintain access. Planning ahead is strongly recommended.

What should researchers consider when communicating with people in China?

Even when your own risk is low, conversations with Chinese classmates, colleagues, or interviewees, especially on sensitive topics, can expose them to scrutiny later. The ethical responsibility to protect the people with whom you interact is often more important than protecting your own data.

Health, health insurance, and personal safety

Health insurance and accessing medical care in China

Long-term academic programs require students to carry international health insurance that covers both routine and emergency care while abroad. A strong plan typically includes:

- Coverage inside and outside China (including during breaks)
- Access to emergency care and hospitalization
- Either direct billing at selected clinics or reimbursement for out-of-pocket costs
- Medical evacuation coverage for serious emergencies

Short-term travelers should confirm whether their U.S. insurance provides international coverage, or whether their university or employer offers supplemental travel insurance. If not, purchasing a short-term international plan is often worthwhile, especially for longer stays.

Before departure, travelers should ensure they can access insurance documents, policy numbers, and emergency contact lines while abroad.

Healthcare options vary by city, but most academic travelers rely on two main systems:

- **International clinics or hospitals** in major cities, often with English-speaking staff and experience handling foreign insurance
- **Public hospitals**, which provide the majority of emergency care nationwide

Public hospitals may involve a more step-based process than U.S. hospitals (registration, small up-front payments, tests, and receipts for reimbursement), but costs are generally much lower than in the United States.

Everyday safety and practical awareness

China is generally considered a low-crime environment for visitors. Most safety issues faced by students and scholars are logistical rather than violent.

Common-sense habits include:

- Using official taxis or reputable ride-hailing apps
- Avoiding unlicensed drivers at airports and stations
- Being cautious about scams, especially urgent calls or messages
- Keeping digital and paper copies of key documents rather than carrying your passport daily

Air quality can vary by season and region, particularly in winter. Travelers with respiratory conditions should monitor air quality apps and plan accordingly.

Frequently Asked Questions on health, insurance, and personal safety

Do I really need special health insurance for China?

For long-term study or research, yes. Most programs require international coverage, and travelers should ensure they have emergency and evacuation protection.

Is medical care accessible for foreigners?

Yes. Major cities have international clinics with English-speaking staff, and public hospitals provide emergency care nationwide. Travelers should expect to pay small fees up front and seek reimbursement later.

Should I bring medications from home?

Yes. Bring enough for the length of your stay, plus copies of prescriptions. Some medications may not be available locally or may differ in formulation.

What should I do in an emergency?

Call **120** for an ambulance or **110** for police. Notify your host institution or program immediately, as they are often best positioned to assist quickly.

Is China generally safe for students and academic visitors?

Yes. The majority of travelers experience China as very safe day-to-day. The most common issues involve scams, transportation logistics, or missed administrative steps, not violent crime.

Learn from recent travelers

Conditions change. Please go to the “Crowd-sourced Guidance” section to read reflections from recent travelers or share your own experience to help keep this Resource Hub current and useful for others.

Engaging with government entities and handling unsolicited requests

While in China, you may find yourself in situations where you will be interacting with Chinese government entities and receiving unsolicited requests, including through public security interviews, propaganda exposure, media appearance requests, or research or writing offers. Although extremely rare, some academic travelers have been approached by individuals from PRC intelligence or the State security apparatus. This is not a common experience, but if this does happen, it is recommended to share the experience with other community members, document it for personal and institutional records, and follow one’s instincts. These steps help demonstrate openness, maintain personal safety, and enhance personal and institutional awareness of potential security or reputational concerns.

Being Approached by Intelligence Agencies

Although extremely rare, some academic travelers have been approached by individuals from PRC intelligence or the State security apparatus. This is not a common experience, but if this does happen, it is recommended to share the experience with other community members, document it for personal and institutional records, and follow one’s instincts. These steps help demonstrate openness, maintain personal safety, and enhance personal and institutional awareness of potential security concerns.

Public Security Interviews; or, Being Invited to Tea

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, some students reported being contacted by police officers

requesting interviews about their time in China. These encounters, often described euphemistically as being “invited to tea,” typically began with a text message, followed by a phone call and an off-campus meeting. Empirically, journalists are more commonly susceptible to these encounters, whereas graduate students and researchers are less susceptible and undergraduate students are rarely impacted.

The officers, usually from the Ministry of State Security, appeared to assess whether the students might serve as intelligence sources. Common signs included requests for secrecy and questions about financial difficulties, intended to gauge discretion and vulnerability to incentives.

Academic community members in China are advised to take the following steps if contacted:

1. **Notify home campus officials and trusted peers immediately, and consider notifying the Embassy or appropriate Consulate.** Get briefed by the administrators and notify them of the time and place you intend to meet and when to be debriefed.
2. **Limit the information shared during any conversation.** Answer questions truthfully, but do not overshare. Attend the meeting without personal devices, or use an older device if necessary.
3. **Be transparent about the contact.** Make clear to the officers that others are aware of the meeting, and politely decline to sign any confidentiality agreements.
4. **Document the interaction.** Upon returning to campus, debrief with administrators, write a summary for institutional records, and retain a personal copy.
5. **Support transparency within the community.** Sharing accurate information with community members helps prevent rumors, reduce isolation, and establish a verifiable record that may later assist with security clearances or investigations.

Propaganda Exposure and Media

Students and scholars traveling to China should be aware that the Chinese government actively uses educational and cultural exchanges as opportunities to shape foreign visitors' perceptions of China, its history, and its political system. Government-sponsored tours, delegations, and institutional visits are often carefully curated to present a favorable portrait of the country, while steering participants away from topics the government deems to be sensitive.

Visitors should be particularly cautious about participating in interviews, panel discussions, or public events that may be recorded or broadcast by Chinese state media outlets. Footage and quotations can be selectively edited, mistranslated, or presented entirely out of context in ways that imply endorsement of government positions. Travelers are encouraged to seek guidance from their home institutions before accepting any media requests, and to approach government-organized programming with informed skepticism — engaging thoughtfully and openly while remaining alert to the ways in which their participation may be framed and used.

Unsolicited Research or Writing Offers

Some students and faculty have reported being approached by individuals claiming affiliation with Chinese think tanks or research institutes who offer unusually high compensation for short essays or opinion pieces. In some cases, these initial offers are followed by escalating requests or pressure to continue collaboration.

Travelers should approach unsolicited proposals cautiously. If compensation appears disproportionate to the task, or if requests expand unexpectedly, it may indicate that the offer is not purely academic in nature. Such approaches should be declined and reported to program leadership or institutional administrators from the home institution.

Section 4 - Crowd-sourced guidance and additional resources

Academic travel to China looks and feels different from a decade ago, and those differences do not show up clearly in official guidance alone. This section brings together testimonials from scholars about the importance of on-the-ground experience in China, as well as reflections from others who have recently studied, researched, worked, or visited China so that future travelers can learn from real experiences.

Why crowd-sourced guidance matters

The Hub was designed to respond directly to student and scholar needs, including the lack of clear, consolidated guidance about conducting fieldwork or study in China today. Hearing from both leaders in the field and peers helps demystify current conditions, highlight city- and program-level variation, highlight what preparation is actually useful, and reduce unnecessary fear while still encouraging caution. It also strengthens the broader community of travelers committed to responsible, ethical engagement.

Recent traveler reflections:

Below you'll find short, anonymized snapshots from travelers who have recently spent time in China. These aren't meant to generalize for everyone; they highlight patterns, surprises, and lessons that may help future travelers prepare thoughtfully.

Delegation visit across four cities:

"I led a small delegation of U.S. school board members across Beijing, Nanjing, Suzhou, and Shanghai. Our hosts were welcoming and organized, but the logistics that tripped people up were surprisingly small: digital payments, app setup, and knowing what to expect day-to-day. We advised participants to set up WeChat Pay and Alipay ahead of time, even then, linking cards sometimes failed, so I often helped cover costs until we sorted it out. The biggest takeaway was how different each city felt. Beijing was more formal and structured; provincial stops felt more relaxed. For many first-time travelers, the trip challenged stereotypes and showed just how varied China is." (January 2026)

Share Your Experience

If you have traveled to China recently, as a student, researcher, educator, delegate, or family visitor, we invite you to contribute. Short reflections about what surprised you, what you found challenging, and what you would tell the next traveler are invaluable.

Submit your response [here](#).

Your responses may be edited lightly for clarity and anonymity. Please avoid sharing confidential details or anything that could put others at risk. By sharing what you learned, you help build a resource that is practical, accurate, and responsive to the needs of future travelers.

What do scholars and researchers say?

What do scholars say academics gain from being in-country?

Researchers with long-term experience in China describe the present environment as more constrained, but not devoid of scholarly or educational value. Some archives are harder to access, approvals can take longer, and sensitive subject matter research may require greater care.

Despite these constraints, being in China still provides forms of understanding that remote engagement cannot replicate: exposure to institutions as they function in practice, everyday social and professional interactions, and the ability to refine questions based on lived context.

Historian [Jeffrey Wasserstrom cautions against “all-or-nothing” thinking](#) about whether engagement is worthwhile. Even in periods of tightening, firsthand experience and people-to-people ties is valuable, particularly for younger scholars seeking deeper grounding. Scholars and commentators, including in the [China Field Notes series led by Scott Kennedy](#), have likewise stressed that fieldwork still matters. Face-to-face interaction, archival digging, and local conversations continue to yield insight that remote analysis cannot replace. This theme also appears in [ChinaFile](#) discussions about whether and how scholars and students should return to China, which highlight both the constraints and the practical, intellectual, and relational value of firsthand engagement even amid harder geopolitics. Together, these voices suggest that, even in a more complicated environment, scholarly engagement is strategically and substantively indispensable.

Voices from the field

“There is so much one can learn about China today without actually setting foot on the ground there. Data, documents, and websites offer more information than one can assess in a lifetime. Social media platforms offer insights into what Chinese are watching, discussing, debating, and denouncing. This information can be aggregated, scraped, translated, and analyzed with increasing accuracy and ease.

So why spend time on the ground? The screen is a substitute for reality. It is a filter that rarely challenges your assumptions. Spending time in China allows you to talk to more people, conduct interviews, and meet with officials. But it will also prompt questions that you didn't know to ask.

Following a recent trip to China, I came back asking questions like: What does Beijing's lack of street addresses suggest about the nature of its urbanization? Were the hundreds of Meituan delivery drivers that I observed idle in the underground food malls migrants who were part of a shift from construction work to gig work after COVID? How do the many layers of airport-like security through which I had to walk to access China's National History Museum on Tiananmen Square change the nature of that space which has been so central to China's 20th century history? Desk research, data analysis, and even Agentic AI can help answer these questions, but it is hard to imagine that it would inspire them."

— Amy E. Gadsden
Associate Vice Provost, Penn Global
Executive Director, Penn China Initiatives

I am encountering a growing number of young people these days who are developing expertise in China without ever having been to China or studying the language. This is a curious trend.

Would you trust a doctor that had never seen a patient? A scientist with only theoretical knowledge but no hands-on experience? An architect with no experience working with building materials? Travel and study in China requires more preparation and precaution than does travel to some other places, but it is important for anyone hoping to understand the country.

— Naima Green-Riley
Assistant Professor of Politics and International Affairs,
School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University

There is no substitute for direct engagement with China to achieve the kind of accurate understanding that people and institutions need to navigate the US-China relationship. The geopolitical friction between the United States and China has not diminished the benefits of studying about China (and in China) -- it has raised them. When institutions and investors are making decisions about diplomacy, supply chains, technology partnerships, regulatory exposure, and long-term strategy, they need analysts who have spent real time on the ground.

People who understand not just official policy positions, but also the texture of how decisions are really made, how institutions truly function, and how people actually live.

Academic exchange is the pipeline for that expertise. It produces the scholars, analysts, and practitioners who can translate China's complexity into actionable insight. At a moment when misperception between Washington and Beijing carries historically high costs, the case for sustaining that pipeline, for students and institutions willing to engage seriously with China, could not be more urgent.

— David Meale
Head, China Practice, Eurasia Group
Former Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy in Beijing

“Having spent much of the last decade living and working in China, I feel confident in recommending that interested students and researchers pay this country an extended visit—as long as they understand that life and work here entail a few restrictions. Once a visitor has adjusted to the minor irritants of China life (such as VPN-only access to some familiar apps and websites), the overall experience can be quite satisfying.

Street life is vibrant, eating and drinking options are plentiful, and the nation’s history and culture are all around you. Day or night, China’s cities are among the safest in the world. Urban transportation networks are modern, clean, safe, and cheap, and the largest high-speed rail network in the world will take you to most any major city.

And while it is true that the space for researchers has narrowed, including some limits on archival access, one can still do plenty of in-person investigations here, including interviews, observations of urban and village life, oral histories, and studies of public history and memory (i.e., museums, memorials)—to say nothing of the unparalleled opportunity to study Chinese language, literature, philosophy, religion, art, music, history, and drama in the land of their creation.”

— Joe Renouard

HNC Resident Professor of History and American Studies

Fei Yi-Ming Journalism Foundation Chair of American Government and Comparative
Politics,

Johns Hopkins University

“Students, scholars, and institutions weigh complex issues—from practical to ethical to political variables—in deciding whether to pursue academic work in China. But that they have the ability to consider going at all should be remembered as the privileged opportunity it is. Far too many academics in China are imprisoned for their work or are otherwise prevented from leaving; far too many people with urgent reasons to go to China, ranging from Uyghurs, Tibetans, Hong Kong people, Han diaspora members who cannot return to see family to scholars seeking rare texts, are systematically denied. Hopefully those who can go will carry this knowledge with them and deploy it in service of a broader community’s needs and knowledge.”

— Sophie Richardson

Co-Executive Director, Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD)

“Scholarly exchange in the policy field, first and foremost, provides firsthand information critical for a reality check. Sitting in the offices in the U.S. does not afford us the true understanding of what is going on in China. What we assume is China’s priority or calculus is many times shaped and influenced by our biases and prior experience. Without direct exchanges, policy professionals are left in the dark. Changing geopolitics elevates, rather than decreases, the need for such authenticity and credible assessment. Scholars do not make policy, but their relatively independent status gives them the luxury not to be led or confined by short-term priorities. And they serve as important channels of communication between the U.S. and China.”

— Yun Sun

Senior Fellow and Director, China
Stimson Center

Sustained academic engagement with China remains indispensable, not despite current geopolitical tensions, but because of them. While more than 15,000 American students were studying in China before COVID-19, I hardly saw any American students when I visited Chinese universities in recent years. The number of Chinese students at U.S. universities has also declined significantly. The Korbel School of Global and Public Affairs at the University of Denver, where I am a professor, has hardly recruited any Chinese graduate students in the past two years. This scholarly exchange crisis may lead to a critical shortage of China specialists in the U.S. and American specialists in China with on-the-ground experience if the trend continues. As a Chinese American scholar of China studies, I am very concerned.

Direct study and research in China and America provide scholars with grounded knowledge that cannot be fully replicated through remote analysis or secondary sources. Immersion in local contexts sharpens our understanding of how policies are interpreted, implemented, and contested on the ground, often in ways that challenge prevailing assumptions. Equally important, scholarly exchange fosters intellectual openness and professional trust across borders. These relationships, built over time through shared inquiry and dialogue, create channels for nuanced communication that are especially valuable when official interactions become strained. Academic collaboration thus serves both epistemic and societal functions: it advances knowledge while helping to sustain a minimum level of mutual understanding. At a moment when simplification and misperception can easily dominate discourse, firsthand experience and continued engagement are critical. The study of China in China and the study of the U.S. in the U.S. not only deepens expertise but also contributes to a more informed, balanced, and constructive global conversation.

— Suisheng Zhao

Professor and Director, Center for China-US Cooperation,
Josef Korbel School of Global and Public Affairs, University of Denver
Editor, Journal of Contemporary China

Additional resources:

This hub is one of several resources available to support your planning. Depending on your needs, you may also find useful guidance from other organizations:

- **From IIE (Institute of International Education):** IIE's [Open Doors data portal](#) provides the most comprehensive annual data on U.S. students studying abroad and international scholars in the United States — including the China-specific figures cited in USCET's Working Group Report. IIE also maintains a [study abroad resource hub](#) with practical guidance for students and advisers planning international academic experiences.
- **From Ithaka S+R:** Ithaka S+R tracks how shifting funding landscapes, federal policy changes, and geopolitical pressures are affecting international research collaboration, with specific attention to the U.S.-China academic relationship. You can find more up-to-date details on U.S. government policy affecting U.S.-China research collaboration by visiting this [policy tracker here](#). Their [China archives](#) also include in-depth analyses of

issues such as restricted access to Chinese research databases and the implications of a growing science-and-technology split between the two countries.

- **From NAFSA (Association of International Educators):** NAFSA maintains a dedicated page tracking U.S. government actions affecting [Chinese students and scholars](#), including visa policy, research security measures, and related regulatory developments. Their broader [policy digest](#) offers regularly updated analysis of federal actions — including cuts to the Fulbright and Critical Language Scholarship programs — that directly affect Americans seeking to study in China.
- **From NSF (National Science Foundation):** NSF provides a growing suite of research security resources designed to help institutions and researchers navigate federal requirements related to international collaboration. Through its [SECURE Center](#) and related initiatives, NSF offers guidance on disclosure requirements, risk assessment, and safeguarding federally funded research, alongside training materials and best practices for compliance. These resources are especially valuable for institutions seeking to balance open scientific collaboration with evolving expectations around research integrity, foreign influence, and national security.