

By Ruofan Yu

Building bridges

I never thought I would miss the days when visa delays were my primary worry. But recently, my experience as a Chinese postdoc working in the United States has taken a darker turn. In February, I was forced to cut my family vacation in China short after hearing the U.S. government was about to issue a ban on travelers from China. Since then, I've been stunned how my people have suffered verbal and physical attacks, how my home country is being used as the name of a virus, and how my local Chinese consulate—which I've visited frequently—was ordered closed by the U.S. government. Last month, a graduate student I know was grilled on suspicion of espionage for 2 hours before boarding a plane to China. Imagining the fear he must have experienced, I was left in tears.

I moved from China to the United States 6 years ago to start my Ph.D. program. Having spent time in Canada before, I didn't face much of a language barrier or culture shock. My main source of stress was the visa approval process. On my first attempt, I received my visa in 5 days. But when I went to China to renew it last year—amid the turmoil of the trade war—the same process took an entire month. All things considered, I was quite lucky, as I know of others who have had to wait months—or even years. Some of my friends simply avoid going back home for the entire duration of their Ph.D. or postdoc years because they don't want to risk leaving the United States and not being able to get back on time.

Both countries have taken a progressively harder stance toward each other in recent years—and as U.S.-China tensions worsen, I am left wondering what will come next. In May, the U.S. government announced that Chinese STEM trainees who work on topics related to “military-civil fusion strategy” will no longer be allowed to enter the country. The announcement doesn't affect me directly—I study baking yeast—but it does make me worried for the future. Will all Chinese STEM trainees be looked at with suspicion from now on?

A few days after the May announcement, I received an email from my department chair, advising employees who are Chinese citizens not to leave the country until more was known about the policy. I appreciated the advice, but I wanted more empathy and emotion—some acknowledgment that my university administrators understood what I was going through. I was not alone: In chat groups and on social media, other Chinese trainees were sharing anger, frustration, and a yearning for support. But people outside our community seemed unaware.



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foreign trainees. The world did not change: The pandemic continued, and U.S.-China tensions did not go away. But I felt better knowing that my academic community supports me.

So I want to say this to my fellow foreign trainees: I understand that for a lot of us, it is hard to speak up and give voice to our feelings. It is scary to stand out as strangers in a foreign land, with limited rights and no family around. Nevertheless, it is important to share your concerns and ask for help. Send emails and letters. Speak up at town hall meetings. Open up to colleagues.

By sharing challenges and engaging in honest dialogue, we can educate the scientific community about the unique issues we face. Such conversations might not move the needle on foreign policy—but on a personal level, they can help build bridges and tear down walls. ■

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