

2026-4-22

China

WSJ Print Edition



More young Chinese are choosing to study and work in China, lured by how livable many cities have become. GILLES SABRIÉ FOR WSJ

The American Dream Fades for Some Chinese

Immigration hurdles, fear of crime among the reasons many are remaining home

BY BRIAN SPEGELE AND JOSH CHIN

BEIJING—For decades, China has broadcast a simple message to its people: America is a chaotic and dangerous place.

For just as long, that message largely failed to resonate, as millions of Chinese citizens saw the U.S. as a land of boundless opportunity.

Today, America's allure is fading. More elite Chinese youths, businesspeople and scientists are gravitating back home. Some who have returned say they are turned off not only by the U.S.'s hardening immigration enforcement, but also by its faulty infrastructure, gun violence and living costs. In China, many cities have become cleaner and more livable, linked by efficient subways and highspeed trains.

The shifting perceptions are a gift to leader Xi Jinping as China's economy is sputtering.

For months, Chinese social--media users have been buzzing about the U.S. "kill line," a phrase used in videogames to describe the point at which a character can be killed with a single blow. Video after video on Chinese apps has explored how many Americans live at this dangerous threshold, a hospital bill or missed paycheck from slipping into poverty.

A State Department spokesperson dismissed such portrayals of life in the U.S. as Chinese Communist Party propaganda, saying they reflect efforts "to block criticism of the CCP itself."

There is still plenty of eye rolling in China at caricatures of the U.S. presented by the propaganda apparatus. And many Chinese families continue to harbor American dreams, including some of China's most ambitious young people who fill lecture halls at Stanford, Harvard and other top universities—an elite slice of the more than 260,000 Chinese students who enrolled in U.S. universities in 2024.

Concerns about rule of law and China's long-term stability have led many wealthy citizens to park their money offshore.

But the experiences of people like Yuner Jiang, who is preparing to finish graduate school at Columbia University in New York, show Chinese disillusionment with the U.S. is real. Jiang, who arrived in the U.S. to attend high school a decade ago, said she is frustrated with the high cost of living in New York and by harassment she has faced on the subway.

Returning to China to work is an attractive option, she said, even if she would earn a fraction of the salary there. “I just feel like the income-to-price ratio is definitely much better in China,” she said.

Signs of a shift arrived in 2020. That year, the Covid-19 pandemic coincided with a series of prosecutions launched under the first Trump administration that accused Chinaborn scientists of espionage— most of which failed.

In 2021, more than 1,400 U.S.-trained Chinese scientists left American jobs for roles in China, a 22% jump from the previous year, according to a survey published by Asian-American Scholar Forum, an advocacy group. Most Chinaborn Ph.D. graduates are still choosing to stay in the U.S., with close to 80% saying they intended to remain in 2024, according to the most recent available survey data from the National Science Foundation. But high-profile departures have continued steadily.

The “push” factors, however, are equally strong.

Frequent changes in immigration rules, combined with homelessness and perceptions of high crime rates in some of the coastal cities where Chinese immigrants tend to live, also are leading people to reconsider the appeal of the American dream, say Chinese people who have spent time in both countries.

Crime in general has fallen in U.S. cities in recent years, with the average annual homicide rate across 35 cities plummeting to 10.4 per 100,000 people in 2025 from 18.6 in 2021, according to the Council on Criminal Justice, a think tank. Still, that number dwarfs China’s homicide rate, which came in at 0.44 per 100,000 in 2024, according to official data.

Some parents in elite Chinese circles, who once would have automatically sent their children to the U.S. for college, are now looking to the U.K. or Australia.

“Without even knowing anything about the U.S., I wanted to go there,” said one China-based executive with an American company. “That was the dream.” Now, he said, he doesn’t feel comfortable making that same choice for his own children.

Perceptions of fading American promise come at a good time for Xi. China expects its economy to grow by at least 4.5% in 2026, less than half the rate of 15 years ago.

Still, a generation of young Chinese raised on expectations of ever-increasing prosperity is protesting by toning down their career ambitions and tuning out government calls to sacrifice for the national good.

China’s messaging has grown more sophisticated, pushing slick video packages through social media, at times specifically targeting young people.

“This isn’t like your grandfather’s CCP propaganda organ,” said Daniel Mattingly, a political scientist at Yale University. “This is a propaganda organ that knows how to sell messaging, that understands targeted messaging, that understands market segmentation.”

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