

# Hutong Cat | In China, international student migration has taken a hit

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## FULL TEXT

India, Nov. 15 – Last week, China eased some of its stringent Covid-control rules, reducing the number of days inbound travellers need to quarantine from 10 to eight and scrapping a penalty for international airlines - temporary suspension of flights on the route - bringing in Covid-19 cases into the country. Technically, it could make it easier for international students - all passengers flying in, to return to China to resume their studies.

For most of the pandemic since early 2020, the Chinese government has maintained strict border controls and specifically banned foreign students from returning to their universities.

Extended border shutdowns disrupted the learning curve for students studying here, hundreds of thousands of whom have remained stranded in their home countries, carrying on with online courses.

Indian students studying in China have had it particularly tough since 2020.

Many returned to India in the first couple of months of that year in a hurry because of the spreading Coronavirus pandemic in China.

Then, by the middle of 2020, Sino-India ties caught a bad chill, bad enough in fact to plunge ties to their worst in decades.

Bad ties and full-blown mistrust between India and China after the Galwan Valley clash in June 2020, cast a shadow on students' careers; worst affected were those studying medicine.

Direct passenger flights between India and China, suspended since March 2020, have not resumed; China continues to strictly restrict who is coming in with stringent visa controls; only some 1,300 visas have been issued to Indian students.

There's been another important development: Recent advisories issued by New Delhi essentially discouraged prospective students - specifically those planning to enrol at affordable Chinese medical universities - from coming to China to study without directly telling them not to.

The two advisories issued in September and in November listed the challenges Indian students face in China. A primary warning was the low pass percentage of China-trained MBBS students at the mandatory Foreign Medical Graduates Examination (FMGE) in India.

Citing a study, the September advisory from the Indian embassy said: "The study shows that only 6,387 out of 40,417 students who appeared in FMG Examination from 2015 to 2021 have cleared it."

"Here, the pass percentage of Indian students who have studied clinical medicine programmes in China in that period in these 45 universities was only 16%. The prospective students and parents may please note this fact while deciding on seeking admission in Chinese universities for clinical medicine programmes," the Indian advisory said. Other concerns included the lack of English language skills of Chinese teachers at the designated universities and the lack of practical/clinical experience for the students "in terms of engaging with patients in certain universities." In the November advisory, the embassy cited the Gazette Notification dated November 18, 2021, by the National Medical Commission (NMC).

"It has unambiguously stated in Clause 4(b) that foreign medical students must be "registered with the respective professional regulatory body or otherwise, competent to grant a license to practice medicine in their respective

jurisdiction of the country in which the medical degree is awarded and at par with the license to practice medicine given to a citizen of that country".

The embassy has told the Chinese authorities and medical colleges that they should ensure that all Indian students coming to China for clinical medicine programmes are educated, trained, and facilitated so that they can fulfil the above requirements of NMC.

It's not known how the Chinese authorities reacted to the request.

"Any student, who joins a clinical medicine programme in China after November 2021 and fails to obtain a license to practice as a medical doctor in China, will be rendered ineligible to appear for FMGE," the advisory said.

Overall, the message to students seems to be that study in China at your peril and without assurance of future employment.

As part of the broader picture, not only for Indian students, the outlook for China as a destination for foreign students has taken a hit because of the pandemic and the country's strict border-control measures.

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), China ranked as the world's third most "significant destination" for international students, hosting 9% of the 5.3 million international students in higher education globally in 2019, a year before the pandemic hit.

"China hosted a total of 492,185 foreign students in the year 2018. This means the target set by the Chinese government in 2010, (of) 500,000 foreign students by 2020 had been virtually achieved by the end of that decade," Yang Peidong, Assistant Professor, National Institute of Education, Humanities & Social Studies Education, Singapore, and expert on international student migration (ISM), said in an email interview.

"According to statistics, in 2018, a total of 492,185 foreign students of all kinds from 196 countries and regions studied in 1,004 institutions of higher learning in 31 provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) across the country, an increase of 3,013 over 2017, an increase of 0.62% (the above data does not include Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan)," the Chinese education ministry said in a statement in April 2019.

"Top 15 by country: South Korea 50,600, Thailand 28,608, Pakistan 28,023, India 23,198, USA 20,996, Russia 19,239, Indonesia 15,050, Laos 14,645, Japan 14,230, Kazakhstan 11,784, Vietnam 11,299, Bangladesh 10,735, France 10,695, Mongolia 10,158, 9,479 in Malaysia," the statement added.

However, since the Covid pandemic, the Chinese government appears to have stopped releasing updated statistics about foreign students in the country.

"With the onset of Covid-19, inbound international student flows to China must have been severely disrupted and reduced, although, in the absence of official data, we do not know the scale of the situation," Yang added.

The pandemic has been, and continues to be, a hugely disruptive event for ISM across the world.

As most countries move from the initial emergency phase of pandemic control to living with the virus and opening up the economy and society, student mobility should rebound and normalise, even if not to the pre-pandemic level fully.

"However, China has chosen an approach to the pandemic (zero Covid strategy) that's at odds with pretty much the rest of the world, and zero Covid is likely to severely damage China's desirability as an ISM destination," Yang said.

Yang added that strict and costly border measures and the daily inconvenience - which can easily escalate into "inhumane lockdowns" - have probably turned many prospective international students away from China.

"The longer China sticks to its current Covid-zero policy, the deeper and longer-lasting the damage will be."

This strategy could also impact the quality of medical education offered in China, Yang said.

"Specifically for the foreign students doing MBBS in China, given how much of China's medical resources are mobilised for fighting the pandemic to achieve covid zero, I suspect the quality of their medical education, especially the practical/hospital attachment part, will be badly affected."

Moreover, international students also need to travel regularly between home and host countries to maintain their social/familial ties which are important for their social and mental well-being.

"China's current border measure, and its knock-on effect on the cost of international air travel etc., will make it very

challenging for international students," Yang added.

Possibly realising the implications, China is gradually reopening its doors to international students.

"China is slowly and gradually opening up student visas to new groups of students. We expect that throughout the Fall 2022 semester, more small groups of students will be returning," the Beijing-based China Admissions, which calls itself an investor-backed online platform for international students to apply to Chinese Universities, said in a report last week.

"As of now, we do not expect the Chinese border to suddenly open to pre-pandemic levels. All indicators from academic and government sources show that the border's opening is going to continue to be gradual," it added.

Sutirtho Patranobis, HT's experienced China hand, writes a weekly column from Beijing, exclusively for HT Premium readers. He was previously posted in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where he covered the final phase of the civil war and its aftermath, and was based in Delhi for several years before that

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## DETAILS

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