

Assessing Chinese Reactions to New U.S. Visa Policies on Chinese Students and Researchers

CSET Media Reaction Brief

JUNE 2020

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The White House on May 29th issued the “Proclamation on the Suspension of Entry as Nonimmigrants of Certain Students and Researchers from the People’s Republic of China.”¹ This proclamation forbids the entry of graduate students or researchers who have past or current affiliations with Chinese entities that “implement or support” China’s military-civil fusion (军民融合; or MCF) strategy.² Reports by *The New York Times* and *Reuters* indicate the new policy may affect between 3,000 and 5,000 Chinese graduate students and researchers, but the State Department has not publicly confirmed these numbers or how it will implement the proclamation.³

This post provides a brief overview of Chinese reactions (as of June 15th), drawing on ministry statements, state-owned media, platforms known in China as “self-media” such as WeChat, and Chinese study abroad blogs meant for prospective or current students. Takeaways and recurring themes include:

- The Chinese government’s official response has been critical but relatively muted.
- Chinese experts and prospective students are uncertain about which Chinese entities qualify as supporting MCF, what defines MCF, and whether students at purportedly MCF-supporting entities have any relationship to the Chinese military. Several experts provide lists of Chinese universities that they think will be affected.
- Chinese articles argue that the proclamation will harm U.S. science and competitiveness, as Chinese students and researchers will go to the European Union, the United Kingdom, Australia, or Japan instead of the United States.

- Posts by Chinese study abroad consultancies and others cite U.S. university statements and guidance to argue that the United States will remain welcoming to Chinese students.

A Critical but Relatively Muted Official Response

Response from the PRC government has been fairly muted. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Education (MOE) have, on a few occasions, been willing to answer media questions about the proclamation during regular press conferences. Additionally, although more prominent Chinese state-owned news organizations like Xinhua and People's Daily have yet to respond, some state-owned and local media sources like Global Times and CGTN have published on this issue.

- As of June 15th, there is a notable lack of response from relevant Chinese government agencies such as the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), who is often viewed as a key player in China's MCF strategy. Neither the Chinese Embassy in the United States nor its Ambassador, Cui Tiankai, has issued any statements.
- A spokesperson from MOE on June 12th responded to a question about the proclamation by stating that China firmly opposes the U.S. government's decision to restrict Chinese students as well as its "politicization and stigmatization of normal overseas exchanges." The statement also argues that these new U.S. measures are "self-contradictory and self-serving."⁴
- During his daily press conferences on May 29th, June 1st, and June 2nd, MOFA Spokesperson Zhao Lijian responded aggressively to questions from both Chinese and foreign media outlets surrounding the possible revocation of Chinese student visas. In response to questions from AFP, Shenzhen TV, CCTV, and Global Times, he stated that the proclamation "is stark political persecution, racial discrimination, and a grave violation of the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese students and researcher sin the United States." He emphasized that it "runs counter to the openness and freedom that the U.S. claims to champion," and questioned the Trump administration's "Cold War mentality."⁵
- Global Times (环球日报) and China Global Television Network (中国国际电视台; or CGTN)⁶ appear to be the only official Chinese state-owned media sources to publish in response to President Trump's

proclamation. Both outlets have published English-language pieces on this issue that appear to be directed at a foreign audience.

- Beijing News on May 30th stated that proclamation reflects “the low credibility of certain American politicians” and “damages the public image of the U.S. with regard to rule of law and human rights.”⁷
- Zhejiang News on May 31st published an equally fiery response, poking fun at President Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan and stating that the United States appears to have no hesitation about “treating Chinese students with the greatest malicious intentions.”⁸
- For its domestic Chinese audience, Global Times on June 5th published an op-ed in vernacular Chinese by Miao (Mabel) Lu, the co-founder and secretary-general of the Center for China and Globalization, that lays out “active measures” (积极措施) that China should take “to ensure the safety of its citizens in the United States.” Some of these recommendations include sending temporary charter flights in support of Chinese nationals and convening roundtable discussions with U.S. counterparts in academia, among others.⁹

Uncertainty About the Proclamation’s Scope

Given that the proclamation does not specify which entities are considered contributors to China’s MCF strategy, Chinese state and non-state-owned sources have speculated on which Chinese university may qualify. Lu’s op-ed in Global Times references 13 universities that she claims the United States has deemed to be participating in defense or MCF-related projects, which are also discussed in several other pieces.

- Lu argues that proclamation’s assertions about MCF, universities, and espionage are false because it is not uncommon for universities with important research functions to engage in research work that relates to national defense. She goes on to note that 10 of the 13 universities that have been “named” by the United States are directly managed by either the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and do not have “special connections with the military.”
- A blog post from “Universities and Scientific Research”¹⁰ lists universities found in Table 1 below as those named in the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Industry and Security’s (BIS) Entity and Unverified Lists.
- The Hainan Province Study Abroad Center directly linked the proclamation to the latest batch of Entity List entries from May 23,

which includes two of the 13 universities (Harbin Institute of Technology and Harbin Engineering University). The Hainan center claims that these 13 universities “have made many achievements in the fields of aerospace, robotics, equipment manufacturing, new energy, new materials, but the research and development of high-end materials and precision optical components are still our weak links.”¹¹

Table 1: Universities named in Chinese articles as likely proclamation targets

| University Name | BIS Entity List | BIS Unverified List | Managing Body |
|--|-----------------|---------------------|---|
| Renmin University of China | | Yes | Ministry of Education |
| Xi’an Jiaotong University | | Yes | Ministry of Education |
| Tongji University | | Yes | Ministry of Education |
| Guangdong University of Technology | | Yes | Guangdong Province |
| National University of Defense Technology | Yes | | Central Military Commission |
| Beihang University* | Yes | | Ministry of Industry and Information Technology |
| Northwestern Polytechnical University* | Yes | | Ministry of Industry and Information Technology |
| University of Electronic Science and Technology of China | Yes | | Ministry of Education |
| Sichuan University | Yes | | Ministry of Education |
| Hunan University ¹² | | | Ministry of Education |
| Nanchang University | | Yes | Jiangxi Province |
| Harbin Institute of Technology* | Yes | | Ministry of Industry and Information Technology |
| Harbin Engineering University* | Yes | | Ministry of Industry and Information Technology |

Source: Ministry of Education¹³ and the China Aerospace Studies Institute¹⁴

** Denotes Seven Sons of National Defense university*

Several reactions from self-media entities¹⁵ and Chinese state-owned media question the MCF aspect of President Trump’s proclamation. These pieces

often bring up what they believe to be the over-inclusive nature of using “military-civil fusion” as a concept in assessing universities. Several pieces also considered it necessary to provide Chinese readers with definitions of MCF and categories such as the Seven Sons of National Defense (国防七子). Commonly cited sources for these definitions are the U.S. State Department, The New York Times, and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI).

- A WeChat piece posted on May 30th provides screenshots of the ASPI Chinese University Defence Tracker and a January 2020 announcement by the U.S. State Department entitled “China’s Military-Civil Fusion Strategy Poses a Risk to National Security.” This WeChat post appears to imply that the U.S. government utilized the aforementioned ASPI tracker in making its strategy.¹⁶
- Another WeChat piece attempts to provide its own interpretation of the following MCF-related questions: 1) which universities are considered Chinese military schools, and 2) are the Seven Sons of National Defense counted as military schools. The author believes that PLA academies such as the National University of Defense Technology and the PLA College of Engineering are most likely to be considered military schools. However, based on the estimated 3,000 students affected according to the New York Times, the author expresses disbelief that the Seven Sons are included, noting that otherwise the number would exceed 3,000.¹⁷
- A June 1st article by CGTN details interviews with two anonymous students from Harbin Institute of Technology and Beihang University who fear that the proclamation will affect their plans to study in the United States thanks to their universities’ U.S.-deemed connections to China’s MCF apparatus. The article states that the two students “both expressed discontent of their schools being targeted, adding that they feel unfairly treated.”¹⁸
- Lighthouse Academy, a study abroad consulting organization, expressed fears that many if not all of China’s universities would ultimately be considered integral to MCF, and called this thinking a resurgence of McCarthyism.¹⁹
- One personal blog cited a general sentiment of ridicule or disbelief from Chinese web users, as the suspected universities are almost identical to Chinese students’ top wish lists for pursuing undergraduate degrees. It argues that many purportedly MCF-related universities are attractive to students because of their general quality, not because they have an interest in doing MCF-related work.²⁰

Views of the Proclamation's Impact

In addition to frequent speculation on which entities qualify, self-media posts also try to assuage students' fears that they could be targeted, while providing several pointers to students who think they may be targeted.

- Beijing New Oriental Study Abroad emphasizes that the choice of field matters, claiming that "not all majors taught at the Seven Sons meet the requirements to be considered an MCF entity. They must be sensitive professions such as missile technology, aviation technology, or military electronic equipment." It also points out that most Chinese individuals will not be doing such advanced research.²¹ (Section 2(a)(v) of the Proclamation exempts individuals from unspecified fields that do not contribute to China's military-civil fusion strategy.)
- For students on valid visas who think they may be targeted, multiple posts also encourage students not to leave the United States.

These posts argue that an increasingly unwelcoming climate may drive Chinese students and researchers to pursue studies or work elsewhere, leading to longer-term losses in scientific innovation and progress for the United States. Given the unwelcoming climate, multiple posts discuss other countries for Chinese scholars to pursue work or study.

- Study abroad consulting group Blue Oak claims this proclamation may discourage students currently in China from pursuing further study or seeking work in the United States.²²
- It also wonders if the order has enough teeth, and posits that if there were true technology transfer concerns, the United States would likely prohibit Chinese students pursuing undergraduate degrees in the United States from pursuing further study at the graduate level. It speculates that the motive is leverage for trade talks or rhetoric for the upcoming election and less about the technology transfer issue.²³
- Beijing New Oriental Study Abroad, a domestic Chinese study abroad organization, cites students who planned to study in the UK or Australia, and are now concerned that the proclamation will drive more students to apply for visas in the UK and Australia, leading to fiercer competition.²⁴
- Another blog centered on International English Language Testing System (IELTS) coverage claimed that the UK will be the next top destination for Chinese students, while Australia will *not* be attractive because it has adopted unfriendly policies toward China.²⁵

- CGTN on June 12th quoted Anne-Marie Graham, CEO of the UK Council for International Student Affairs, who argued that the proclamation “could be a significant blow to recruitment for U.S. universities, particularly as it runs counter to policies in other English-speaking countries such as the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.”²⁶

Views of the U.S. Policy Debate

Chinese language reporting meant for Chinese nationals, particularly students who are or intend to study abroad in the United States, consistently cites responses by U.S. academic institutions in criticizing President Trump’s proclamation. Institutions including Northwestern University, Cornell University, University of Notre Dame have issued guidance for Chinese students and scholars following Trump’s announcement on May 29th. The guidance, which is fairly similar across these four universities, attempts to provide more detailed information regarding to whom the proclamation may or may not apply.

- A WeChat post from June 4th includes screenshots of guidance from the aforementioned universities as part of its argument that the United States will continue to welcome Chinese students and researchers, and cites these university guidelines as evidence that the visa ban will affect only a relatively small number of people. In addition to the universities mentioned above, it also cites similar statements made by Carnegie Mellon University, Columbia University, Northeastern University, University of California Berkeley, and Stanford University.²⁷
- At least two pieces specifically cite announcements made by Dr. Wendy Wolford, Cornell University’s Deputy Dean of International Affairs. Chinese publication *The Paper* on May 30th cited Dr. Wolford’s statement advocating for the continued renewal of visas and work permits for Chinese students and scholars at Cornell.²⁸
- Beijing New Oriental Study Abroad also cited Dr. Wolford’s statement in which she expresses strong opposition to the U.S. government’s actions against Chinese students.²⁹ Dr. Wolford on May 29th wrote in both English and Chinese that “Cornell University is strengthened by its outstanding Chinese students, distinguished researchers, and dedicated alumni.”³⁰

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Endnotes

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