

# The Last Word...

## China Makes New Rules for Self-Sponsored Students to the West

by Glenn Shive, Ph.D.

The *New York Times* reported on October 18 that education policy makers in Beijing are considering new restrictions on study abroad. The draft guidelines circulated by the State Council would require young people to have worked from four to seven years after graduation from university before becoming eligible to go overseas to study.

The new rules appear to be aimed primarily at self-sponsored students (with F-visas) who finance their study abroad through relatives and friends overseas and/or scholarships they secure on their own. If implemented, these guidelines would shut out study abroad virtually out of reach for anyone in their twenties. Most self-sponsored students go to the United States, where they receive advanced education at virtually no expense to China. Who are these students, and why is China closing the door on them?

According to Leo Orleans (*CEN*, September 1989), there are about 15,000 students from China who hold F visas and are enrolled in American universities. That is about a third of the total number of Chinese on U.S. campuses. If taken separately, F students from the People's Republic of China would constitute the 7th largest group of foreign students in the U.S.

Orleans estimates that about 29,000 visas have been issued to Chinese during the past decade, of whom 11,000 have changed status and remain in the U.S., and 3,000 have returned to China. Most education officials in the U.S. and China expect that the highest rates of non-return will occur among the self-sponsored students. Often their work units in China discontinue paying their salaries and benefits, and do not necessarily hold open their positions while studying overseas. F students get their passports from local secu-

rity offices, not from the State Education Commission. Thus Beijing authorities have very little control over the outflow of self-sponsored students.

The self-sponsored channel to study in the United States is clearly in jeopardy given the political climate in China today. The immediate imperative for the hardliners in power is to re-establish control over the urban, educated, younger generation who joined so fervently in the pro-democracy movement last spring.

The reformers of the 1980s decentralized the system for study abroad. As a result, Beijing authorities now hold few carrots of resources and few sticks of sanctions by which to control the many local work units and security bureaus whose decisions determine the flow of self-sponsored, and even many officially sponsored students, who go abroad. This decentralized system was consistent with market thinking and open doors to the West. Since June 4th, however, the sense of flight and escapism among university people has grown. At the same time, the Party is now determined to clamp down on sources of foreign influences that have undermined their authority and exposed them to criticism based on Western democratic values.

Central policy makers want Party officials, not academicians, firmly in control of study abroad. Junior faculty were important supporters of the democracy movement. Now they wish more ardently than before to escape the tightening controls over academic life by going overseas for study.

It is generally known among academicians in China that American university and government officials have been solicitous toward Chinese students in the U.S. in the wake of the Tianamen crackdown. They hope that admissions letters, I-20 forms

and scholarship support for new students will continue to be possible for them as they were for their colleagues now in the U.S.

But the screen mesh covering the open door is getting denser and less porous. The draft regulations propose a "special national exam on Chinese history, ideology and culture to test whether students are likely to return after studies abroad," according to *The New York Times*. This in effect would institutionalize political criteria in the selection process for study abroad.

The politics of study abroad is intensifying. Bureaucrats who had looked the other way while thousands of self-sponsored students made their way to American universities are turning their heads and tightening controls.

Throughout the 1980s one heard often enough from Chinese going abroad that it was "better to get out while you can." Precious opportunities may not come around again. They had learned that, given the political system in China, one cannot depend on the future. They were right. □

Dr. Glenn Shive is Director of the China Office of the Institute of International Education, headquartered in Hong Kong. This is an excerpt from a longer article prepared by Dr. Shive on the current situation regarding self-sponsored students in China and printed here with his permission.