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China Visa Offices Overwhelmed in Wake of Border Opening

Long wait times sow anxiety among overseas Chinese trying to visit relatives sick with Covid



A reunion occurred at Beijing Capital International Airport this month despite visa delays, limited flights and pricey airfares that are complicating travel to China from the U.S.

PHOTO: THOMAS PETER/REUTERS

By *Karen Hao* [Follow](#) and *Wenxin Fan* [Follow](#)

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HONG KONG—China has opened its doors to the world after three years of zero-Covid controls—at least in theory. In practice, many travelers eager or desperate to visit the country are struggling to acquire the key that will gain them entry.

Processing times for visas to enter China have multiplied as the Chinese Embassy in Washington and consulates across the U.S. struggle to keep up with a wave of applications. Many visa offices are closed entirely, leaving would-be visitors to contend unassisted with an online application system that travel agencies say is prone to crashing.

Meanwhile, long-term visas still haven't been reinstated after China suspended them during the pandemic, when it imposed some of the world's strictest border controls.

The situation has frustrated business travelers and overseas Chinese anxious to reunite with friends and family over the coming Lunar New Year holiday. Desperation is particularly high among those separated by a border from ailing loved ones, many sick with the very disease, Covid, that has kept them apart for so long.

Visa delays are just the latest barrier that have made China's border reopening more an aspiration than a practical reality. Limited flights and exorbitant airfares have also made it difficult for people to enter the country. For members of the Chinese diaspora racing against the clock to see sick parents, or attend funerals, the challenges add to the growing toll of three years of hardship.

Shawn Lu, the operation manager at Chicago-based agency **China Visa Solutions**, said his phone started ringing off the hook after the Chinese border reopened on Jan. 8. "One after the other, one after the other," he said. Many were simply looking for someone to talk to—to get basic questions answered—because they couldn't get through to their local consulate, he said.



Beijing Capital International Airport this month. Processing times for visas to enter China have soared as officials face a wave of applications.

PHOTO: MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Four callers told him they had dire family emergencies, Mr. Lu said, while others expressed how much they longed to reunite with their relatives. He said he dearly missed his own parents in China, whom he hasn't seen in more than three years, and is coping with the idea that he may need to wait longer.

The wife of a New Jersey-based director at a pharmaceutical company said he began the paperwork to obtain a visa a couple of days after China reopened so that he could tend to his

mother, who had just been hospitalized with Covid in the inland megacity of Chongqing.

She said it took him three days to prepare all the materials required by the visa application, which included dozens of probing questions about his relatives and work history. With no sign of a visa after five days and his mother's condition deteriorating, he begged his consulate to process the paperwork faster.

His mother died the following morning, she said, speaking on his behalf hours after he'd received the bad news because he was too upset to talk. The irony, she said, was he'd given up his Chinese passport just last year to become a U.S. citizen. Had he kept it for a little longer, he could have skipped the visa.

"Everything went wrong," she said. "Now it's too late."

In response to The Wall Street Journal's reporting, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on Friday that it greatly valued the needs of overseas Chinese, including Chinese Americans, to reunite with relatives in China. It also said for the first time that it would issue foreign citizens who hold long-term multiple-entry visas with new two-entry visas, valid for half a year, free of charge before their existing visas are reinstated.

"The processing time will gradually be back to normal," the ministry added.

During the pandemic, China closed its physical U.S.-based visa offices, discontinued in-person appointments and required application materials, including passports, to be mailed in. Now borders have reopened but offices haven't. On their websites, the embassy and New York consulate say they will restart in-person visa services on Jan. 25. The other U.S.-based consulates say they will restart Feb. 3.

Several travelers said the few times they have been able to contact consulates, they have been told little can be done to expedite visas for family emergencies because so many other applicants are in a similar situation.

Visa agencies say it now takes two to three weeks to get a visa, compared with three to four days before the pandemic.

Antoinette Hannan Leon, vice president of ItsEasy, a New York-based passport and visa agency, said China used to be one of its easiest visas to process. "Now it's one of our most nerve-racking," she said. "We tell clients, three to four days is an impossibility."

The Journal's calls to the Chinese Embassy and San Francisco consulate's visa inquiry line reached full voice mailboxes. Several calls to the New York, Chicago and Los Angeles consulate's visa offices found busy lines.

Visa issues have also ensnared holders of 10-year multiple-entry visas that haven't technically expired. Before the pandemic, such visas were popular among people who frequented China to see family or conduct business activities. During the pandemic, the Chinese government suspended their use, requiring individuals to apply for separate single-entry visas to access the country.

On Change.org, a website for starting online petitions, a plea at the Chinese Embassy in the U.S. to "remove obstacles for visiting China" and reinstate the 10-year visas has received about 29,000 signatures.

A San Francisco-based consultant said the consulate told her to apply for a new visa despite having a long-term one in her passport after her 88-year-old father in Chongqing came down with Covid and developed internal bleeding.

Two weeks have passed since she submitted her application with no word on how much longer it could take.

"He could die at any time," she said, of her father. "Nobody actually cares about us. We don't have a voice."

Others have been more fortunate. Hanhan Hammer, a power grid analyst living in Massachusetts, said she was anxious to fly to southern China earlier this year after her 97-year-old grandmother was hospitalized with Covid, but was similarly told to apply for a new visa.

The doctor asked the family to start lining up for a crematorium to guarantee a slot after so many people had died during the recent wave of Covid infections, she said. "I thought I would never see my grandma again," she said.

Her luck turned last week, when her grandmother, who had survived war and famine over the course of her long life, conquered Covid and was released from the hospital. Ms. Hammer now plans to visit after Lunar New Year.

"I'm overjoyed," she said.

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