



Pay to Play? U.S. Consulates in China Require Payment Before Setting Appointments

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The phrase “pay to play” sometimes carries negative connotations. It describes politicians who require constituents to make campaign contributions in return for special favors. In the music business, “pay to play” refers to fees charged by venue owners to artists who want to perform there.

Effective November 15, 2010, the U.S. Embassy and Consulates in mainland China will require payment of the nonimmigrant visa application fee (966 RMB/140 USD; more in certain cases) prior to scheduling a visa appointment. Specifically, the applicant must pay the visa application fee, and buy a special calling card, at CITIC Bank before phoning the Call Center to make an appointment.

Here’s my initial impression. Probably for most applicants the new requirement is just a minor speed bump. But applicants who have tight timetables to go to the U.S. may be well advised to first buy the calling card at the Bank, then phone the Call Center to check whether timely appointments are available, then pay the fee to the Bank, then phone again to schedule the appointment. That’s more annoying. (The State Department posts visa wait times, but these are averages and are not updated daily).

Worst of all, between the moment that an applicant calls to check whether appointments are necessary and the moment he or she calls back to schedule (having paid the fee in the

meantime), the acceptable appointment slots may have been given to other applicants. Now the applicant is out of luck—maybe fuming mad—because the fee is non-refundable and non-transferable. (It can be used within 1 year if another need to travel arises).

Also negatively impacted is any applicant who needs to request an “expedited” appointment. Expedited appointments may be granted if there is an “emergency” justifying being moved to the front of the line. But it’s not clear precisely what constitutes an “emergency.” For example, the Embassy’s website mentions “humanitarian” situations involving hospitalized “immediate relatives” (i.e., parents, spouse and children) but says nothing about other relatives, such as grandparents and siblings. Nor does the Embassy mention business emergencies. To request an expedited appointment, the applicant must first pay the fee to book an appointment, perhaps only to learn later no expedite will be granted and that the money paid is lost.

So is this new system best described as “pay to play” with its negative connotations? The Embassy hasn’t yet given a justification for the new procedure or explained how the problems described here can be mitigated. The Embassy needs to look for creative ways to cost-effectively serve the growing number of Chinese seeking U.S. visas, and maybe this new procedure is cost effective. Yet the Embassy also has a diplomatic mission, to win support for America and its global priorities. The new procedure may cost too many supporters. I look forward to learning more about this policy, and I hope that my initial take is mistaken.

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