
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Visa Refusal Rate as an Institutional Accessibility Signal: Evidence from B-Class Visitor Visa Data from Mainland China

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether the visa refusal rate functions as a market-recognizable institutional accessibility signal that shapes pre-application expectations and subsequent visitor visa issuance performance, focusing on the B-class visitor visa market from Mainland China to the United States. Using publicly available U.S. Department of State annual nonimmigrant visa issuance data and B-class adjusted refusal rates for fiscal years 2013–2024, the study employs descriptive analysis, stage comparison, and simple lagged association analysis, aggregating B-1, B-1/B-2, and B-2 issuances and pairing the previous fiscal year's refusal rate with the next year's issuance growth rate while excluding pandemic-affected years. Four distinct stages are identified: rapid growth (2013–2015), sustained decline (2016–2019), collapse (2020–2021), and partial recovery (2022–2024), with 2024 issuances remaining at only 29.13% of the 2015 peak. Over the same period, the adjusted refusal rate rose from 8.50% to 25.37%. After excluding pandemic anomalies, the previous year's refusal rate exhibits a directionally consistent negative association with the next year's issuance growth rate (Pearson $r = -0.6715$; Spearman $\rho = -0.7714$), although statistical significance is limited by the small sample. The study argues that visa refusal rates can serve as observable institutional-accessibility signals that shape perceptions of destination competitiveness and visitor-flow recovery in long-haul outbound markets, extending visa regime scholarship by treating refusal rate as a market-relevant indicator rather than merely an approval outcome and offering a replicable, transparent secondary-data approach for tourism management research.

KEYWORDS

Visa refusal rate; Institutional signal; Risk perception; Cross-border mobility; Market expectation

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1. Introduction

In international tourism and cross-border visitor flows, the institutional environment is not an exogenous background variable but an important component of destination competitiveness. A substantial body of research shows that visa restrictions, visa exemptions, visa facilitation, and differences in visa types significantly affect international tourist arrivals, cross-border tourism flows, and destination choice behavior [1][7][10][14][15]. This indicates that cross-border mobility depends not only on destination attractiveness, transport accessibility, and price conditions but also on institutional accessibility.

However, the focus of existing research on visa issues has largely centered on formal institutional arrangements themselves—whether a visa is required, whether visa-free or visa-on-arrival policies are implemented, whether visa processing is convenient, and the differential effects of different visa types on tourism flows [1][7][10][14][15]. In contrast, the market implications of refusal rate, a resultant institutional indicator, have not been adequately discussed. Compared with policy texts, refusal rate is more readily perceived by potential applicants through media reports, social platforms, intermediary consultations, and experiential dissemination as a composite representation of “application difficulty,” “procedural risk,” “success probability,” or “institutional uncertainty.” Thus, the relevance of refusal rate may extend beyond the outcome at the approval stage to market judgments formed prior to application.

Research on risk perception, psychological distance, information quality, and trust mechanisms provides a theoretical foundation for this judgment. Existing studies indicate that media coverage, risk perception, and destination trust significantly influence post-pandemic outbound travel willingness, travel preparation, and revisit intention [2][4][6]; the quality of social media tourism information and online tourism information, along with the resulting trust and resonance, also significantly affects travel intention [3][5][9]. Collectively, these studies show that, in long-haul cross-border travel contexts characterized by uncertainty and procedural costs, potential applicants do not base decisions solely on institutional texts but form expectations of “whether it is worth applying” based on available information.

The B-class visa market from Mainland China to the United States provides a suitable case for examining this issue. On the one hand, the U.S. Department of State continuously publishes annual nonimmigrant visa issuance statistics and B-class visa adjusted refusal rate data; on the other hand, this market has undergone multiple stages since 2013—including expansion, contraction, pandemic shock, and recovery—facilitating observation of the temporal relationship between issuance changes and shifts in the refusal environment. It should be clarified that the object of this study is B-class visitor visas rather than the narrow “tourist visa.” According to the U.S. Department of State definition, B-1 is for temporary business, B-2 is for tourism, visiting family/friends, and medical treatment, and B-1/B-2 is a combined category; therefore, the aggregate of B-1, B-1/B-2, and B-2 reflects broader visitor visa demand rather than purely tourism demand.

On this basis, this paper focuses on two research questions: first, what stage-specific evolutionary characteristics are exhibited by B-class visitor visa issuances from Mainland China to the United States and the B-class visa refusal rate for Chinese applicants from fiscal years 2013 to 2024; second, after excluding pandemic-related anomalies, whether there exists a directionally clear empirical association between prior refusal environments and subsequent issuance performance. The value of this paper does not lie in advancing strong causal propositions but in asking, from a tourism management perspective, whether refusal rate can be interpreted as a market-recognizable institutional signal whose variation is associated with subsequent issuance performance and may shape pre-application expectations through risk perception and expectation adjustment. From a tourism management perspective, this issue matters because visa outcomes shape not only formal mobility conditions but also destination competitiveness, market expectations, and the pace of visitor-flow recovery in long-haul markets.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Analysis

2.1 Visa Regimes, Institutional Accessibility, and Cross-Border Flows

Research on the relationship between visa regimes and cross-border flows has reached a strong consensus. Neumayer points out that visa restrictions significantly suppress bilateral travel flows [14]; Lawson and Roychoudhury further find that travel visa requirements create clear obstacles to international tourism [15]. Building on this, Chi, Lee, and Chang find that tourist visa exemption schemes significantly increase international tourist arrivals [1]; Rosselló and Santana-Gallego show that different visa types exert heterogeneous effects on international tourism flows [7]. Recent studies focused on the Chinese market similarly indicate that visa exemptions and visa facilitation remain important drivers of post-pandemic cross-border flow recovery [8][10]. These studies collectively demonstrate that visa regimes are not peripheral administrative issues external to tourism activities but directly constitute an important dimension of destination institutional accessibility. Tourists consider not only whether a destination is “worth visiting” but also whether it is “easy to visit” and “worth investing time, money, and uncertainty costs in the application process.” However, this research lineage has primarily focused on formal institutional arrangements themselves, with limited discussion of how markets form reverse judgments of institutional environments based on approval outcomes. Compared with formal policies, refusal rate possesses stronger real-world perceptibility and outcome orientation and is therefore more likely to serve as a key basis for potential applicants to update their institutional judgments.

2.2 Risk Perception, Information Environment, and Potential Application Behavior

Another relevant body of research centers on the influence of risk perception, information quality, psychological distance, and trust mechanisms on tourism behavior. Zhang et al.’s study of Chinese residents shows that media coverage and risk perception significantly affect post-pandemic outbound travel willingness and preparation behavior [2]. Sun et al. note that trust in destination risk regulation influences Chinese tourists’ revisit intention in post-pandemic contexts [4]. Fuchs, Efrat-Treister, and Westphal find that higher risk perception weakens travel intention through a psychological distance mechanism [6]. At the same time, research on online tourism information shows that the quality of social media tourism information and online tourism information, along with the resulting trust and resonance, significantly affects travel intention and destination image [3][5][9]. This research lineage highlights a key fact: potential travelers do not make decisions under conditions of complete information and complete certainty. Particularly in long-haul outbound visitor markets, the visa application process is complex, preparation costs are high, and approval outcomes are uncertain; procedural risk thus easily becomes an important variable in destination choice. Consequently, refusal rate may matter to potential applicants through at least two expectation-based pathways: first, by shaping judgments about visa success probability; second, by shaping expectations about time costs, economic costs, and psychological costs. Under these conditions, the relevance of refusal rate may extend beyond observed rejection outcomes and may also be reflected in unrealized or deferred applications that never enter the formal process.

2.3 Behavioral Indicators, Official Data, and Research Gaps

In recent years, tourism demand research has increasingly adopted search data, online behavioral data, and other proxy indicators to overcome the limitations of traditional intention measures. Lee demonstrates that search data can improve tourism demand forecasting [11]; Mikulić and Baumgärtner provide a systematic reflection on the application of Google Trends and Baidu Index in tourism demand forecasting [12]; Song and Zhang note that tourism demand modeling is shifting from traditional time-series approaches toward multi-source data integration [13]. These studies indicate that, provided variable definitions are transparent, scopes are clear, and interpretive boundaries are explicit, official administrative data and behavioral indicators can serve as valid evidence in tourism management research.

Compared with indirect indicators such as search indices, the advantage of official visa issuance data lies in its recording of a real behavioral outcome that has already entered the institutional channel. In visa research, although annual visa issuance volumes are not equivalent to complete tourism consumption outcomes and are not purely subjective intentions, they can present trends in visa demand for a given destination under a unified scope. Therefore, if the research objective is to identify whether the refusal environment is related to subsequent changes in destination-oriented visa activity, using official visa issuance volumes as the outcome variable possesses strong methodological legitimacy.

Taken together, existing research has adequately explained why visa regimes affect cross-border flows and why risk perception affects travel willingness, yet has seldom connected the two through the resultant institutional indicator of refusal rate. On this basis, this paper advances the following research proposition: when a given source market faces a higher B-class visa refusal environment in the previous period, subsequent B-class visitor visa issuance performance is generally weaker. This proposition does not presuppose strict causality. Rather, it treats refusal rate as an institutional variable with potential signaling properties and examines whether a directionally consistent lagged association can be identified between shifts in the refusal environment and subsequent issuance outcomes under conditions of publicly available secondary data.

3. Research Design, Data, and Methods

3.1 Data Sources and Variable Definitions

This paper employs two types of publicly available data from the U.S. Department of State. The first is the annual NIV Detail Table from the Nonimmigrant Visa Statistics page. This paper extracts the annual issuance volumes for B-1, B-1/B-2, and B-2 visas under the “China - mainland” category and sums them to form the annual B-class visitor visa issuance volume from Mainland China to the United States. The second is the Calculation of the Adjusted Visa Refusal Rate for Tourist and Business Travelers page and its annual files, which provide B-class adjusted refusal rates by nationality.

Three points must be emphasized. First, issuance volumes and refusal rates are not entirely isomorphic: the former uses the “China - mainland” issuance statistical scope, while the latter uses the “China” nationality scope. Second, refusal rates are calculated on the basis of unique applicants and final annual status, whereas issuance volumes reflect annual issuance records. Third, given that the U.S. Department of State’s monthly pages explicitly state that monthly issuance data from FY2020 onward cannot be directly summed into final annual values, this paper limits the formal analysis period to fiscal years 2013–2024 and does not use FY2025 issuance volumes that have not been confirmed in the final annual tables. Accordingly, this paper does not treat the two as a strict proportional relationship within the same population but as two macro indicators reflecting the same source market’s institutional environment and issuance outcomes, used to identify stage characteristics and lagged associations.

3.2 Research Design and Analytical Methods

This paper adopts a research design of “literature integration—official statistics compilation—stage comparison—simple lagged association analysis.” First, by integrating literature on visa regimes, risk perception, and behavioral indicators, an explanatory framework of “refusal rate—market signal—subsequent issuance performance” is constructed. Second, based on publicly available U.S. Department of State data, the B-class visa issuance volumes from Mainland China to the United States and the B-class adjusted refusal rates for Chinese nationality applicants from fiscal years 2013 to 2024 are systematically compiled. Finally, descriptive statistics, stage comparisons, and lagged association analysis are used to examine whether a directionally consistent relationship can be identified between the two series. This design also has a practical advantage: it can be replicated with publicly available secondary data and imposes a relatively low methodological burden when proprietary application-level data are unavailable.

Descriptive statistics are used to present long-term changes in issuance volumes and refusal rates. Stage comparisons are used to identify structural differences across growth, contraction, shock, and recovery periods. Lagged association analysis pairs the previous fiscal year’s refusal rate with the next fiscal year’s issuance growth rate to reduce the risk of mechanical explanations arising from contemporaneous juxtaposition. Given that fiscal years 2020–2022 were simultaneously affected by the combined impact of the pandemic, consular appointment supply, international flight recovery, and border mobility restrictions, this paper treats this period as an anomalous interval and reports results after its exclusion separately.

This paper does not employ complex econometric models, primarily for two reasons. First, the sample period is short and contains clear structural breaks; second, the objective of this paper is to provide replicable exploratory evidence for the

proposition that refusal rate serves as a market signal rather than to conduct high-identification causal estimation. Accordingly, the empirical results are interpreted as associations rather than strict causal effects.

4. Research Results

4.1 Data Presentation

Table 1 reports B-class visitor visa issuances from Mainland China to the United States and the adjusted refusal rates for B-class visas for Chinese applicants from fiscal years 2013 to 2024. The FY2024 issuance volume of 649,238 has been cross-verified as correct and equals the sum of B-1 (3,101), B-1/B-2 (645,977), and B-2 (160).

Table 1. China Mainland to U.S. B-Class Visitor Visa Issuances and B-Class Adjusted Refusal Rates, Fiscal Years 2013–2024

Fiscal Year	B-Class Visa Issuances	Adjusted Refusal Rate (%)
2013	1,147,737	8.50
2014	1,404,469	9.00
2015	2,228,750	10.03
2016	1,991,647	12.35
2017	1,454,271	14.57
2018	1,243,515	17.00
2019	1,021,730	18.22
2020	258,886	22.12
2021	2,153	79.09
2022	70,228	30.39
2023	268,656	26.63
2024	649,238	25.37

Note: B-class visa issuances = B-1 + B-1/B-2 + B-2. The U.S. Department of State has already published the Chinese B-class adjusted refusal rate for FY2025 as 20.21%; however, because the final annual issuance statistics have not yet been listed in the publicly available annual tables, this paper does not include FY2025 in the formal analysis. Data compiled from the U.S. Department of State Annual NIV Detail Table and the B-class adjusted refusal rate page.

Table 1 shows that B-class visa issuances rose rapidly from 1,147,737 in fiscal years 2013–2015 to 2,228,750, then declined continuously from 1,991,647 to 1,021,730 in fiscal years 2016–2019. Issuances fell sharply in fiscal years 2020–2021 under the pandemic shock, recovered somewhat in fiscal years 2022–2024, yet the 649,238 issuances in fiscal year 2024 represented only 29.13% of the fiscal year 2015 peak. Correspondingly, the B-class adjusted refusal rate rose overall from 8.50% in fiscal year 2013 to 25.37% in fiscal year 2024. It must be reiterated that what is presented here is the stage-specific co-movement of two macro indicators rather than a proportional decomposition within the same population.

4.2 Stage Comparison

Based on turning points in issuance trends and combined with external event contexts, this paper divides the sample period into four stages: fiscal years 2013–2015 as the growth period, fiscal years 2016–2019 as the contraction period, fiscal years 2020–2021 as the shock period, and fiscal years 2022–2024 as the recovery period. The rationale for this division derives primarily from the stage transitions in issuance trends: fiscal year 2015 corresponds to the sample-period issuance peak, with continuous decline beginning in fiscal year 2016; fiscal years 2020–2021 experienced significant disturbance from the pandemic and consular processing capacity constraints; recovery began after 2022 but did not return to pre-pandemic levels.

In the growth period, lower refusal rates coexisted with higher issuance growth; in the contraction period, continuously rising refusal rates corresponded temporally with continuously declining issuance volumes; the shock period was subject to strong joint effects of the pandemic and consular supply factors; in the recovery period, although issuance volumes showed clear repair, refusal rates remained significantly higher than at the beginning of the sample. From the perspective of institutional accessibility, this means that the market faced not only the rule-based question of whether a visa is required but also the resultant information of whether application difficulty has increased. In the continuous contraction stage of fiscal years 2016–2019, the directional divergence between changes in issuance volumes and refusal rates was relatively stable; this is consistent with the theoretical expectation that refusal rate may operate as a market-relevant risk signal, yet it is insufficient by itself to establish the underlying mechanism.

4.3 Lagged Association Analysis

To better align with the theoretical logic that prior refusal environments influence subsequent issuance performance, this paper pairs the previous fiscal year's refusal rate with the next fiscal year's issuance growth rate. Based on cross-verification of the data in Table 1, within the relatively stable pre-pandemic window of fiscal years 2014–2019, the Pearson correlation coefficient between the previous fiscal year's refusal rate and the next fiscal year's issuance growth rate was -0.6715 , and the Spearman correlation coefficient was -0.7714 . The corresponding two-tailed p-values were approximately 0.144 and 0.072 , respectively. This suggests that, after excluding extreme pandemic disturbances, higher prior refusal rates were generally associated with weaker subsequent issuance performance; however, given the limited number of sample points, this result is better understood as a simple test of directional consistency rather than strong evidence in the sense of statistical inference.

This finding is consistent with the literature on risk perception and information quality. Existing research shows that media coverage, risk perception, tourism information quality, and destination trust significantly influence potential travelers' behavioral judgments [2][3][5][6][9]. Therefore, if refusal rate is persistently perceived by the market as high, potential applicants may interpret it as a decline in application success probability and an increase in procedural costs, leading to postponement, substitution, or exit prior to formal application. It must be emphasized that the data in this paper do not directly observe applicants' exit behavior; thus, the market-signal interpretation advanced here should be understood as an explanation consistent with the empirical results rather than as a directly verified causal chain.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Significance: From Approval Outcome to Market Signal

The primary theoretical contribution of this paper is to suggest that refusal rate can be analytically treated not only as an approval outcome but also as a potentially market-relevant institutional signal. In traditional visa research, institutional constraints are typically discussed through visa requirements, visa exemptions, and visa facilitation arrangements [1][7][10][14][15]; this paper emphasizes that resultant information on institutional operation can likewise enter potential applicants' decision-making processes. Compared with visa provisions, refusal rate is closer to information that ordinary applicants can directly understand and therefore may possess information-transmission functions: it may provide the market with a basis for judging institutional accessibility, application success probability, and procedural uncertainty. Relevant research on visa type effects, risk perception, and destination trust collectively provides theoretical support for this explanation [2][4][6][7][9].

5.2 Methodological Significance: An Empirical Research Pathway under Publicly Available Secondary Data Conditions

The methodological value of this paper lies in its adoption—under conditions of a short sample period and clear structural breaks—of transparent descriptive statistics, stage comparisons, and simple lagged analysis rather than forcing the use of complex models with insufficient identification power, thereby forming a replicable, traceable, and clearly bounded empirical research pathway. This pathway is particularly suitable for handling relationships among institutional variables, sudden shocks, and macro-behavioral outcomes and also helps reduce the risk of over-inference common in publicly available secondary data research. Compared with high-complexity models, the advantage of this method lies not in form but in its greater fidelity to the data structure itself. In this sense, the study offers not only a substantive argument about visa environments but also a workable empirical template for tourism management research on institutional signals under data-constrained conditions.

5.3 Implications for Tourism Management

From a practical perspective, this viewpoint helps explain why market demand may still fluctuate markedly in certain destinations even when formal visa rules are not frequently revised. In cross-border visitor markets, potential applicants and intermediaries may not fully interpret policy texts yet rely heavily on resultant information such as how difficult the application is and what the recent approval rate is. For long-haul, pre-approval international markets, the market image of the institutional environment itself constitutes part of destination competitiveness. Therefore, from a tourism management perspective, the visa environment is not merely an administrative management issue but an institutional condition that affects market expectations. In this sense, refusal rate can also be viewed as part of the destination's externally perceived management environment, with implications for market communication, expectation management, and source-market recovery strategy.

For destination managers, refusal rates should be incorporated into market diagnostics and competitiveness assessments. For tourism intermediaries and outbound tourism enterprises, the visa risk environment directly affects clients' destination choice, itinerary planning, and consumption commitments; enterprises need to incorporate visa risk consultation, expectation communication, and alternative destination design into product strategies. For policy formulation and institutional communication, even if formal rules remain unchanged, once the market forms a widespread impression of difficult applications or low approval rates, visa demand and the pace of market recovery may be suppressed.

5.4 Research Boundaries and Limitations

This paper proceeds with clear boundary awareness. First, issuance volumes are not equivalent to narrow tourism demand; they are simultaneously influenced by application willingness, approval outcomes, and administrative supply capacity. Second, the official statistical scopes of refusal rates and issuance volumes are not entirely consistent; therefore, their relationship cannot be mechanically interpreted as a proportional change within the same population. Third, bilateral relations, international flight recovery, travel costs, macroeconomic expectations, and other factors may jointly influence visa applications and issuance changes. Fourth, this paper infers the market-signal interpretation from macro data and has not directly measured individual-level risk perception and exit behavior. Precisely for these reasons, the results are defined as empirical associations consistent with theoretical expectations and are not exaggerated into strictly identified causal effects.

Future research can further combine application volumes, appointment waiting times, flight supply, search indices, and social media text to conduct more direct tests of the mechanism by which refusal rate is perceived, disseminated, and translated into behavioral expectations by potential applicants, and enhance the generalizability of conclusions through cross-national, cross-visa-category, or cross-destination comparisons.

6. Conclusion

Based on publicly available data from the U.S. Department of State, this paper examines the stage evolution and lagged association between B-class visitor visa issuances from Mainland China to the United States and the B-class visa refusal rate for Chinese applicants from fiscal years 2013 to 2024. The findings are as follows: first, after rapid expansion in fiscal years 2013–2015, issuance volumes began a continuous decline from fiscal year 2016 and experienced extreme contraction during the pandemic period; although clear recovery occurred by fiscal year 2024, volumes remained far below the fiscal year 2015 high point; second, refusal rates rose overall from 8.50% in fiscal year 2013 to 25.37% in fiscal year 2024, indicating a significant deterioration in the institutional risk environment relative to the beginning of the sample; third, within the relatively stable pre-pandemic window, a directionally clear negative association existed between prior refusal environments and subsequent issuance performance, although statistical significance was limited.

Accordingly, this paper proposes that refusal rate can be interpreted as a market-recognizable institutional signal and may shape pre-application expectations through risk perception and expectation adjustment. The academic value of this paper is reflected in two main points. First, it incorporates refusal rate into the analytical purview of tourism management, thereby extending discussion of resultant institutional indicators in visa regime research. Second, without relying on complex models, it uses publicly available secondary data, stage comparisons, and simple lagged analysis to provide replicable preliminary evidence on the issue of refusal rate as a market-relevant signal. Overall, the study suggests that visa refusal rates may form part of the perceived accessibility of a destination and should therefore be considered in tourism market recovery, destination competitiveness, and visitor-flow management.

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