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Scientists Are Mired in China-U.S. Tensions

Chinese American researchers and educators must balance transparency and compliance with advocacy and awareness.

Chinese American researchers and educators must continue to grapple with three complex challenges as a second Trump administration begins.

The first is the sharp deterioration of U.S.-China relations. The second, related challenge is that linguistic and family connections to China, considered an asset until around a decade ago, have come to be seen as a massive liability. The third challenge is Chinese Americans' relative lack of political capital, arising from different approaches to communication and airing grievances.

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ASSET OR LIABILITY?

Historically, Chinese Americans' dual cultural competence allowed them to serve as intermediaries in scientific, economic, and academic collaborations between China and the United States. During the 1990s and up to the first Trump administration, American academic institutions eagerly sought out Chinese American faculty to create and manage collaborations with their peers in China.

Many U.S. universities established physical presences in China—including Harvard, Stanford, the University of Chicago, and NYU. Others formed collaboration agreements with Chinese universities, including MIT, the University of Michigan, and the University of California.

Beginning in 2018, these alliances have met with suspicion, amid rising geopolitical tensions between the two nations. As the U.S. government has implemented stringent policies to counter perceived threats of intellectual property theft and espionage, Chinese American researchers and professionals have faced increased scrutiny (see also the Gorski & Toomey memo elsewhere in this report).

The China Initiative, launched by the Department of Justice in 2018, exemplifies this shift. By 2021, at least 77 individuals had been charged, according to a **report by *MIT Technology Review***, of which about 88% were of Chinese heritage.

Notable examples of the devastating impact of the China Initiative include the cases of Professors Anming Hu, Franklin Tao, and Gang Chen (see the Kusakawa memo elsewhere in this report for more details). Hu, an engineer at the University of Tennessee, was charged with, and then acquitted of, wire fraud and lying about his affiliation with a Chinese university. Tao, a chemist at the University of Kansas, had convictions (of wire fraud and false statements) overturned for lack of evidence. Chen, a mechanical engineer at MIT, was arrested on allegations of failing to disclose connections to China —charges that were dropped a year later.

These researchers, and many others, had their lives and careers derailed. They were scrutinized as potential national security risks simply due to their normal activities undertaken in China during the era of broad engagements between the two countries. The collateral damage has been profound, as revealed by a study conducted by the Asian American Scholar Forum (AASF) in 2022. Called ***Caught in the Crossfire: Fears of Chinese-American Scientists***, it provides crucial insights.

The survey of 1,949 Chinese American scientists and researchers across the United States found widespread stress and anxiety. Almost three quarters said they feared being surveilled by the U.S. government; nearly two thirds said they were afraid of being falsely accused of spying. Many—42%—of the China-born scientists polled said they were considering leaving the United States. More than one third of all who replied (38%) were thinking about leaving academia or changing professions altogether. This climate of fear has impacted science itself: 45% of respondents had reduced their collaborations with scientists based in China; 40% had reduced their participation in federally funded projects.

The China Initiative officially ended in 2022. Its profound effects on collaboration and talent retention are still being felt, presenting significant challenges to the U.S. research ecosystem and its global competitiveness.

LEGITIMATE CONCERNS

The situation for scholars is complicated by the fact that the People's Republic of China (PRC) does pose legitimate national security concerns. Among Chinese American academics, there has not been sufficient understanding or explicit acknowledgment of this complex facet of U.S.-China relations (see the Hung memo elsewhere in this report).

Take China's military-civil fusion (MCF) strategy. It blurs the lines between civilian research and military development. Under the MCF policy, officially adopted by the Chinese government in 2015, scientific and technological advances in civilian sectors are quickly repurposed for military use. This creates serious concerns about how even benign research collaborations could be leveraged to bolster China's military capabilities. According to a **2020 report** by the U.S. Department of State, this strategy covers areas such as artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, advanced computing, quantum technologies, and biotechnology. A nuanced strategy to counter this is required.

Similarly, there are national security concerns over the PRC's Thousand Talents Program (TTP), launched in 2008. Many countries have their own programs for attracting academics and entrepreneurs; few have an explicit MCF strategy. The TTP had recruited over **7,000 high-level overseas professionals** as of 2018, raising real questions about the effect of the TTP on future military capabilities.

ASSERTIVENESS GAP

These increasing tensions place a growing burden on the political advocacy and communication skills of the Chinese American community. Jackson Lu, an assistant professor at MIT, has conducted research indicating that Chinese Americans may tend to **use indirect communication styles**, which can be misinterpreted as evasiveness or passivity in the American context. Lu and his colleagues suggested in their 2020 article that East Asians were less likely to be promoted to leadership positions, in part due to being perceived as less assertive compared to their Western counterparts.

Contributing to these broad-brush differences are cultural norms that emphasize humility, conflict avoidance, and respect for authority. As a result, Chinese Americans can struggle to advocate for their rights, particularly in instances of discrimination or unjust scrutiny.

Another reason for the communications breakdown can be the upbringing in China that many first-generation Chinese Americans experienced. Autocracies like the PRC often do not emphasize or develop public communication skills in their citizens. In authoritarian regimes, conformity and obedience are valued over individual expression and dissent. This distinct experience can make it difficult for some first-generation Chinese Americans to assert their rights within a democratic society that prizes open dialogue and debate.

As Nobel laureate Amartya Sen explains, writing of "discussion democracies" in his book ***The Argumentative Indian***, public discourse is fundamental to democratic processes. Here, the ability to engage in debate and articulate viewpoints enables the representation of interests and the protection of rights. However, many Chinese Americans, shaped by cultural norms that discourage open confrontation, have not honed the skills to actively participate.

A PATH FORWARD

To address these challenges, the community of Chinese American researchers and educators must balance transparency and compliance with advocacy and awareness. It is not easy to articulate a clear and convincing strategy to counteract national security risks while protecting civil rights, but three things can help.

Researchers need to be up-front about their affiliations and collaborations with foreign institutions, and adhere fully to U.S. regulations. In the current climate, maintaining clear records and understanding the boundaries of international ties is essential. Such transparency will build trust, and it will help researchers avoid inadvertent legal or ethical violations. Researchers should also demand that the U.S. government be transparent about its own policy, process, and deliberations regarding disclosure, conflicts of interest, and many other related issues.

In addition, scholars need to develop greater awareness of the potential dual-use implications of research and the national security strategies of the PRC. Academics and professionals should be educated on the military-civil fusion policy and other ways in which seemingly innocuous collaborations could have unintended consequences.

Finally, Chinese American researchers must invest in developing political networks, communication skills, and advocacy strategies that enable them to effectively navigate the democratic landscape (see the Chen memo elsewhere in this report). By actively engaging in policy discussions, forming alliances with other communities, and openly addressing issues of discrimination and profiling, the community can better advocate for its rights and interests.

FURTHER READING

Huang, Yasheng. "Why U.S.–China Relations Are Too Important to Be Left to Politicians." *Nature* 631, no. 8022 (2024): 736–39. **https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-02385-7**.

MIT Strategy Group. *University Engagement with China: An MIT Approach*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2022. **https://global.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FINALUniversity-Engagement-with-China_An-MIT-Approach-Nov2022.pdf**.

Xie, Yu, Xihong Lin, Ju Li, Qian He, and Junming Huang. "Caught in the Crossfire: Fears of Chinese–American Scientists." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, no. 27 (2023): e2216248120. **https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2216248120**.

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