Chinese Americans uneasy as tensions disturb research

Government concerns about foreign influence also pose difficulties for academia at large.

BY JEFF TOLLEFSON

A crackdown on foreign influence being carried out by the US government is taking a toll on Chinese American researchers and US academia at large, according to academics and legal experts.

Government-instigated investigations that have led US research institutions to seek the dismissal of at least five ethnically Chinese scientists are fuelling fears that such researchers are being unfairly targeted, although the government agency involved denies this, as does one of the research institutions.

And the broader crackdown, which includes reduced access to visas and tougher export controls, leaves research institutions struggling to balance legitimate government concerns with academic openness, according to associations that represent academics.

Some fear that the rising tensions could lead to an exodus of researchers with Chinese backgrounds from US institutions.

“If this continues, we’re going to see changes in the populations that we have on our campuses,” says Wayne Mowery, an export-compliance officer at Pennsylvania State University in State College and chair of the Association of University Export Control Officers.

Simmering political tensions between the United States and China, including an escalating trade war, are increasingly affecting research. Last August, the director of the...
US National Institutes of Health (NIH), Francis Collins, sent letters to more than 10,000 US institutions raising concerns about "some foreign entities" interfering in the funding, research and peer review of NIH-supported projects. In April this year, Collins said that investigations into researchers at dozens of institutions had uncovered breaches of the agency’s rules.

A week later, it emerged that, after receiving letters from the NIH, the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston had moved to dismiss three researchers, all ethnically Chinese, two of whom chose to resign instead. The scientists were accused of breaching confidentiality, including by sharing grant proposals that they were reviewing, and by failing to disclose foreign funding and affiliations at institutions abroad.

Then, last month, Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, announced that it had fired two faculty members after investigations prompted by the NIH. Emory alleges that the researchers, whom it did not identify, had failed to properly report foreign funding and "the extent of their work for research institutions and universities in China". Neuroscientist Li Xiao-Jiang has since identified himself and his laboratory co-leader and wife — who are both Chinese Americans — as the dismissed scientists and disputed the charges. He says he had informed the university of his work in China.

**RACIAL DRAGNET?**

The investigations do not focus on espionage involving the Chinese government, and some fear the crackdown might be creating a dragnet most likely to snap people of Chinese descent that could amount to racial profiling, the practice of targeting people because of their racial or ethnic background. US federal law prohibits unequal treatment on the basis of race.

"We don't have enough information to make the call on whether there is racial profiling going on or not, but there is concern," says Steven Pei, a physicist at the University of Houston and former chair of the advocacy group United Chinese Americans in Washington DC.

One scientist at MD Anderson, who was born in China and is now a US citizen, says: "I definitely feel the pressure of the racial profiling." The scientist, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation, adds: "I've got a few other offers, and will very likely leave very soon."

Both MD Anderson and the NIH are adamant that the crackdown does not amount to racial profiling. MD Anderson president Peter Pisters points out that only a tiny proportion of his centre’s staff has been investigated. "This is fundamentally about ethics and integrity," he says. "It’s not about ethnicity." Pisters has agreed to meet with Pei and the United Chinese Americans this month.

And although the NIH acknowledges that China has been a major focus of its investigations, it says that it has not singled out ethnically Chinese researchers, and has looked into potential violations involving researchers who are not ethnically Chinese.

"We’re focusing on objective behaviours," Michael Lauer, a deputy director at the agency, told *Nature*. "Not all of them involve China, and not all of the scientists whom we have discovered problems with are ethnically Chinese."

In a statement to *Nature*, Emory University did not comment directly on whether its actions amount to racial profiling, but said it is committed "to our vital collaborations with researchers from around the world" and "values the international diversity of its students, faculty, and staff, including those from China."

The US government crackdown on researchers goes beyond the NIH. The Department of Energy has said it will no longer allow its employees and grant recipients to participate in talent-recruitment programmes run by “sensitive” countries, a ban assumed to apply to the Chinese government’s Thousand Talents Plan — which brings leading academics back to China. In June 2018, the US state department limited visas for Chinese graduate students in robotics, aviation and high-tech manufacturing to one year, rather than five. The Department of Defense and the National Science Foundation are also evaluating their policies.

Such changes are creating a new landscape for ethnically Chinese researchers, says Frank Wu, a law professor at the University of California, Hastings, and a member of the Committee of 100, a group of prominent Chinese Americans that works to advance US–China relations. Researchers need to understand that behaviours that were once considered acceptable, or even encouraged — such as participating in the Thousand Talents programme — are now questioned or banned, he says. Wu and others in the Committee of 100 are working to advise scientists on how to respond. On 20 May, the committee co-hosted a seminar in San Francisco with the Asia Society of Northern California, on the rising US–China tensions.

Some confusion is natural, says Wu, but the United States should be engaging with Chinese Americans, not alienating them. "There are wrongdoers, and we should go after them," he says. "But that can be done without going after everyone with a similar ethnic background."

**BALANCING ACT**

The tensions also pose a conundrum for research institutions, which must strike a delicate balance between addressing legitimate national-security concerns and maintaining academic openness, says Tobin Smith, vice-president for policy at the Association of American Universities in Washington DC.

Universities must help to ensure the integrity of federally funded research, he says, but he also understands the worries about profiling. US intelligence agencies cite the threat of espionage from China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, he says, "but let’s face it, the concerns are being driven by China."

Mowery says that the US government needs to spell out what is expected of academic institutions when it comes to foreign interference. For instance, the government brought criminal charges against the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei in January, but has yet to define what this means for universities that have collaborations with the company. Huawei has denied that it poses a security risk.

Too often, Mowery and others say, scientists and university administrators are operating under a haze of unclear and often shifting rules and expectations. And the Chinese American community’s concerns about profiling are growing, he says. "We’re aware of their concerns, and we’re also aware of the impact that this could have on our institutions."