



Shuguang Zhang (far right) of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is vocal about his concerns.

GEOPOLITICS

# Hostile climate on US campuses

MIT staff of Chinese descent describe how a government crackdown on foreign influence is affecting them.

BY ELIE DOLGIN, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Immunologist Jianzhu Chen was heading home from Singapore in May when a US customs agent pulled him aside and asked: do you work for a foreign government?

Chen is a Chinese-born US citizen who has worked at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge for 25 years. He regularly flies back and forth to Asia and had never encountered this line of questioning before. “It was quite intrusive,” he says. “Anyone of Chinese descent becomes a suspect.”

Chen’s experience comes amid claims that a US government crackdown on foreign influence is unfairly targeting scientists of Chinese origin. In response, MIT, one of the world’s top-ranked universities, has joined other prominent institutions in voicing support for their ethnic Chinese scholars. An open letter published on 25 June by MIT president Rafael Reif describes how research staff “feel unfairly scrutinized, stigmatized and on edge — because of their Chinese ethnicity alone”, in their dealings with government representatives.

Government agencies dispute that they are singling out ethnically Chinese scientists, and emphasize the need to contain undue foreign influence while preserving scientific integrity

and international collaboration.

But MIT scientists who spoke to *Nature* described various discomfiting experiences, including unusually long processing delays for visa applications; forceful questioning from customs agents; and surprise visits from law-enforcement officials on campus.

“The current atmosphere creates a lot of psychological fear,” says MIT mechanical engineer Gang Chen, who earlier this year cut short a planned sabbatical at the Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen to avoid any suspicion that he might be leaking intellectual property or scientific know-how to Chinese colleagues.

Research institutes are under increasing pressure from various branches of the US government, including the FBI and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), to confront the potential for foreign states to steal valuable intellectual property.

Scientists of Chinese background — including US citizens and permanent residents — are often the focus of government inquiry, prompting accusations that such researchers

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are being targeted because of their ethnicity.

“There’s suspicion related to any activities in terms of Chinese ties,” says MIT physicist Nicholas Fang. “That’s racial profiling. That’s a real problem.”

For example, US research institutes have moved to dismiss at least five ethnically Chinese researchers funded by the NIH after receiving notifications from the agency as part of a sweeping initiative that began last August. The allegations include not reporting Chinese funding and researchers violating confidentiality rules associated with government-supported projects. At least two of the researchers have publicly disputed the claims.

The NIH forcefully disputes that racial bias has contributed to its investigations. “Our focus is not on specific people, it’s on specific types of behaviour,” says NIH deputy director for extramural research Michael Lauer, in particular a failure to disclose funding from, or employment agreements with, foreign institutions. “None of this has anything to do with racial profiling,” he says. “These are all very specific types of behaviours that get to the heart of NIH’s ability to make fair and unbiased funding decisions.” Lauer also told *Nature* that universities have quietly fired more scientists as a result of the NIH crackdown.

An FBI spokesperson declined to comment on the MIT open letter, noting only that the agency cannot initiate an investigation solely on the basis of an individual’s race, ethnicity or national origin.

The letter reflects growing unease at MIT. “It was scary,” says one former MIT engineering postdoc, now at Peking University in Beijing, who says he was twice interviewed last year by federal agents and who asked not to be named in this article. He thinks this was, in part, because of his involvement in China’s recruitment programme for overseas researchers, the Thousand Talents Plan. “I feel like I was unfairly targeted just because I’m Chinese.”

FBI officials have described Thousand Talents as a way to steal proprietary information and know-how from abroad. And last month, the Department of Energy (DOE) banned staff from participating in talent-recruitment programmes run by China, North Korea, Russia and Iran. “It’s the programmes that we’re targeting, not the people or their nationality,” says DOE spokesperson Kelly Love.

The MIT open letter follows similar statements from at least ten other institutions, including Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and Stanford University in California.

Protein biochemist Shuguang Zhang from the MIT Media Lab, who raised concerns with Reif before the MIT head published the letter, now wants more institutions to speak up.

Zhang — a naturalized US citizen who has worked at MIT for more than 30 years — says he is forgoing US government grants. “I will get funding from other sources,” he says. Other scientists with Chinese pedigrees, he fears, might just leave the country altogether. ■