

China Initiative spawns distrust—and activism

Two surveys reveal fallout from U.S. investigations as Chinese faculty form campus groups

By Jeffrey Mervis

Scientists of Chinese heritage working in the United States are making the case that the U.S. government's 3-year-old China Initiative and rising anti-Asian violence threaten not only their research, personal safety, and civil rights, but also the academic research enterprise.

Two recent surveys document what had previously been anecdotal evidence of the impact of the China Initiative, which has led to federal investigations of hundreds of U.S. researchers and criminal charges against more than two dozen, mostly of Chinese origin. Several scientists have been convicted of failing to disclose foreign funding ties and defrauding the government.

The surveys find that disturbingly large percentages of respondents have abandoned scientific collaborations with their counterparts in China, thought twice about applying for federal funding, and said no to Chinese graduate students and visiting scholars asking to work in their labs (see chart, right). Significant numbers also fear being monitored by government agencies and are weighing leaving the United States. One survey polled members of the University of Michigan Association of Chinese Professors (UM-ACP); the other examined a national sample of both Chinese and non-Chinese academic scientists.

This week, UM-ACP and similar groups at a dozen other U.S. universities wrote to President Joe Biden asking him to end the initiative, compensate those whose careers have been derailed by unproven allegations, and narrow the scope of future investigations to focus on genuine threats to national security.

Speaking out doesn't come naturally to many members of the groups writing to Biden, its leaders say. "Chinese American scientists traditionally don't do that, but the time has come," says Duxin Sun, a professor of pharmacy and president of UM-ACP.

In July, UM-ACP polled its 370 members, all UM faculty. Nearly 20% of the 123 respondents said they had been the subject of an investigation connected to research collaborations in China. They were contacted by university officers in 15 cases, federal agents in nine cases, and a federal research agency in one case. (Some faculty faced

scrutiny from more than one entity.) To preserve anonymity, the survey didn't ask for details about the investigations.

The survey also revealed a broader sense of angst among Chinese faculty at UM. Nearly two-thirds said they "don't feel safe" as a Chinese academic for a variety of reasons, and 42% feel their university would not defend them if they were the target of a federal investigation. Some 71% believe their concerns "are largely invisible" to university administrators, and 89% believe Asian Americans are underrepresented in top-level posts. "I'm grateful to the UM-ACP for identifying fac-

ulty concerns about policies, practices, and climate that impact their success at UM and across the country," says Susan Collins, UM's provost, adding that "the strength of the university rests on the excellence of our faculty."

A second survey tallied responses from nearly 2000 U.S. scientists at 83 of the country's largest research universities. Almost half were of Chinese heritage. Sponsored by the Committee of 100 (C-100), a group of prominent Chinese Americans from all sectors, it found that Chinese researchers are four times more likely to fear government surveillance than their non-Chinese colleagues and to have canceled projects with researchers in China for fear those activities could make them a target. "We anticipated some evidence of [Chinese scientists feeling subject to] racial profiling, but not how stark these differences would be," says the study's lead author, education researcher Jenny Lee of the University of Arizona.

C-100 President Zhengyu Huang, an investment banker and philanthropist, notes that discrimination against Asians has deep roots in U.S. society. "Historically, the government has played an explicit role in upholding racism and racial profiling," Huang asserts. "And even when it is implicit, the effect is the same: Lives are ruined."

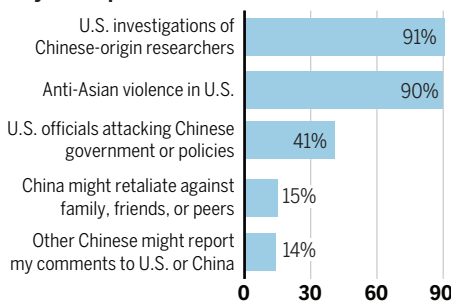
Critics of the China Initiative believe terminating it would help end that ugly legacy. In recent weeks, faculty at prominent U.S. universities, including Stanford University; the University of California, Berkeley; UM; and Princeton University, have called on Biden to find "an alternative response to the challenges posed by" U.S.-Chinese relations. This week's joint letter from the collection of Chinese academic organizations supports that move, but also emphasizes the human toll the initiative has taken on its members, their families, and the larger scientific community.

The emergence of these groups represents a reluctant coming of age for Chinese American scientists like Rongwei Yang. "I personally have little interest in becoming political," says Yang, a mathematician who leads the 130-member University at Albany Association of Chinese Professionals, formed in May. "However, like many of my peers, I worry that the China Initiative may inadvertently harm the U.S. academic enterprise in the long run. So what we are doing is more than safeguarding our own rights." ■

Feeling threatened

At the University of Michigan (UM), 64% of 123 Chinese faculty responding to a survey said the China Initiative and U.S.-Chinese tensions have made them feel unsafe; 33% said the climate has caused them to consider not applying for U.S. grants. A survey of nearly 2000 scientists at 83 large universities found Chinese and non-Chinese scientists respond differently to issues raised by the China Initiative.

Why UM respondents don't feel safe:



Why UM respondents might not seek U.S. grants:



Contrasting responses:



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Downloaded from https://www.science.org on November 10, 2021

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Science, 374 (6568), • DOI: 10.1126/science.acx9540

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