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Trump Administration Wrongfully Brands Chinese Scientists as Spies, Hindering Scientific Progress

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I once thought that international scientific collaboration – of talking to your colleagues from around the world and sharing scientific information that could lead to real breakthroughs in the field – was a topic that was so non-controversial, it was a given. It just makes sense. Getting the best minds together in a room to solve the world's toughest problems is one of the best ways for science to progress. How could anyone disagree with this?

Apparently, the Trump administration disagrees. At least in the case of scientists who are nationally Chinese. And, in a few cases, American scientists who are ethnically Chinese.

There is currently a slew of evidence suggesting that the Trump administration is

disproportionately targeting Chinese students, scholars, and scientists for presumed espionage activities in a way that dangerously borders on racial profiling and harassment, which has the real possibility of stifling international progress on the world's most pressing scientific issues.

Chinese scientists are being targeted...

I'm sure it will surprise no one when I say that President Trump has a habit of carrying out [anti-immigration policies](#). But what has been less focused on is just how [detrimental](#) these types of actions are for scientific community. Science, by its very nature, [thrives on diversity](#).

Bloomberg Businessweek recently [featured an article](#) suggesting that federal authorities may be developing a mindset that equates Chinese scientists with villainous actors that aim to spy on and steal proprietary information. FBI director Christopher Wray [has publicly stated](#) that China is engaging in a “whole-of-society approach” to stealing innovations from US businesses and universities, which include “graduate students and researchers... working on behalf of China,” and thereby attempting to “exploit the very open, collaborative research environment that we have in this country.”

Since [December 2017](#), a number of actions have been carried out by the Trump administration that reinforce this message. Take the National Institutes of Health (NIH), one of the most distinguished and wholly scientific organizations in the federal government. The NIH has started requiring that foreign scientists [bring their passports](#) to enter any NIH building and then endure questions about their nationality. Additionally, the NIH has sent letters to [dozens of major US research universities](#) in order to obtain more information on certain faculty members with possible links to foreign governments. [Science Insider learned](#) that at some of these research institutions, every researcher flagged by the NIH was Chinese-American. Other such actions by the administration include: [high-profile arrests](#) of Chinese-American scientists falsely accused of spying; numerous [Chinese](#)

[social scientists](#) having had their US visas revoked; and, a reported plan by the Trump administration to dramatically decrease the visa length of [Chinese students](#) studying in STEM fields.

Federal agencies have been making an alarming number of unnecessary arrests of people of Chinese descent. According to [one study](#), these efforts are leading to a tripling of espionage arrests of defendants with Chinese names in recent years. And of these arrests, one of every five were wrongfully accused by authorities; this is nearly twice the percentage of non-Chinese defendants. The author of the paper warned that federal agents and prosecutors may be assuming that Chinese scientists are not here to conduct science, but to spy, “In the same way racial profiling of African Americans as criminals may create the crime of ‘driving while black,’ profiling of Asian Americans as spies ... may be creating a new crime: ‘[researching while Asian](#).’ ”

...Which is causing fear in the community

As a result, worry has started to spread through the community. For the first time in recent years, the number of Chinese students enrolling in US undergraduate programs has decreased according to the [National Science Foundation](#), though the trend is being driven primarily by non-STEM majors. In March, several groups of Chinese and Chinese-American scientists [wrote a letter](#) that was published in the journal *Science* expressing concern over “the recent political rhetoric and policies that single out students and scholars of Chinese descent working in the United States as threats to U.S. national interests.” According to the letter, “confusion, fear, and frustration” are spreading among scientists of Chinese descent because of fears of “being singled out for scapegoating, stereotyping, and racial profiling.”

The letter also points out that these policies are stymieing scientific research: “Open data access and data sharing are important for accelerating research advancement and can be implemented without putting the U.S. security at risk.



NIH has exposed such policies for years.” By giving in to this culture of bias, the US government is ignoring its long-standing policy on the importance of scientific collaboration. For instance, the Department of Defense issued a [memorandum in 2010](#) stating that the agency “fully supports free scientific exchanges and dissemination of research results to the maximum extent possible.”

Scientific partnerships should not be criminalized

Scientists of Chinese descent are being put into an impossible situation. On the one hand, they have been encouraged for years by their research institutions in the United States to seek out relationships with their international scientific peers in order to work together and solve hard problems. The clearest example of this collaboration comes from cancer research. The NIH’s Cancer wing, the National Cancer Institute (NCI), has stressed the importance of international collaboration in order to improve cancer outcomes in the [scientific literature](#) and in the webpage of the NCI’s [Cancer Moonshot](#) program (one of the tag lines read “Cancer knows no borders”). There is even a [NCI group](#) dedicated specifically to the purpose of international research collaborations.

On the other hand, several of the [FBI actions](#) towards Chinese or Chinese-American scientists (i.e. arrests, house visits to ask about “loyalty,” and reading private emails) have been directed at cancer researchers who were carrying out perfectly reasonable scientific partnerships with oncologists in China. And through these actions, the US government may be scaring off brilliant scientists of Chinese descent from conducting research that could help find treatments for cancer.

This is not the first time that [anti-Chinese sentiment](#) has been codified into US policy, but we must remember that these actions have a cost. And the cost of this bias could result in the erosion of a rich scientific tradition of collaboration and partnerships between scientists across the globe.

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