

China Really Wants to Attract Talented Scientists. Trump Just Helped.

Even before the U.S. threatened to bar international students and besieged universities, China's huge spending campaign on the sciences was bearing fruit.



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By Vivian Wang

Vivian Wang reported from Hangzhou, China, home of Westlake University, as well as Beijing.

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China was already scoring wins in its rivalry with the United States for scientific talent. It had drawn some of the world's best researchers to its campuses, people decorated with Nobel Prizes, MacArthur "Genius" grants and seemingly every other academic laurel on offer.

Now the Trump administration's policies might soon bolster China's efforts.

Under President Trump, the United States is slashing the research funding that helped establish its reputation as the global leader in science and technology. The president is also attacking the country's premier universities, and trying to limit the enrollment of international students.

Scientists from China are under particular pressure, as U.S. officials have said that they may pose a national security threat by funneling valuable knowledge to China. Chinese-born scientists have been investigated or even arrested. Last week, the Trump administration said it would work to "aggressively revoke" the visas of Chinese students in "critical fields."

As a result, many scholars are looking elsewhere.

And Chinese institutions have been quick to try and capitalize. Universities in Hong Kong and Xi'an said they would offer streamlined admission to transfer students from Harvard. An ad from a group with links to the Chinese Academy of Sciences welcomed “talents who have been dismissed by the U.S. NIH,” or National Institutes of Health.



Students taking photos at Peking University in Beijing, on Friday. Andrea Verdelli for The New York Times

“The United States is shooting itself in the foot,” said Zhang Xiaoming, an anatomy expert who last year left the Baylor College of Medicine, in Texas, to lead the medical education program at Westlake University, a research university in the tech hub of Hangzhou.

“Since I went to the United States more than 30 years ago, so much of its research has been supported by foreigners, including many Chinese,” said Professor Zhang, who emphasized that he was speaking for himself, not his employer. “Without

foreigners, at least in the field of scientific research, they can't go on."

On its own, China had become more attractive to scientists in recent years because of the huge investments the country has made in research. Westlake is a prime example.

Established in 2018 by several high-profile scientists who had themselves returned to China from the West, Westlake's campus exudes technological advancement. A spaceship-like tower looms over rows of research laboratories. Computing centers and animal testing facilities cluster around a central lawn, in a shape designed to evoke a biological cell.

In its main academic building, portraits of dozens of professors are on display — all of whom were recruited from overseas. There is Guan Kunliang, a biochemist who won a MacArthur "Genius" grant while in Michigan; Cheng Jianjun, a materials engineer honored multiple times by the National Science Foundation; Yu Hongtao, a Harvard-educated cell biologist who received millions in funding from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in Maryland.

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Recruitment notices advertise high compensation, in line with those at top foreign universities.

Westlake has been perhaps the most successful Chinese university at recruiting overseas talent, but it is far from the only one. Between 2010 and 2021, nearly 12,500 scientists of Chinese descent left the United States for China, according to a study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. The rate of departure was accelerating: More than half of them left in just the five years between 2017 and 2021.



Portraits of world-class scientists displayed in the main academic building of Westlake University in Hangzhou. Vivian Wang/The New York Times

The trend has only continued in the last few years, said Yu Xie, a professor at Princeton University who coauthored the study.

Nor is it only Chinese-born scientists who are jumping ship. Charles Lieber, a former Harvard chemist who was convicted in 2023 of failing to disclose payments from a Chinese university, recently joined Tsinghua University.

Chinese scientists have long flocked to American universities, lured by the promise of a world-class education and resources that their home country could not provide. In the 1980s, Chinese scientists who visited the United States would collect disposable test tubes to reuse in China, said Rao Yi, a neurobiologist at Peking University in Beijing, who studied and worked in the United States for two decades.

The admiration continued even as China's economy boomed. In 2020, nearly one-fifth of Ph.D.s in science, technology, engineering and mathematics awarded in the United States went to students from China, according to data from the National Science Foundation. Historically, the vast majority of those Ph.D.s stayed in the United States — 87 percent between 2005 and 2015, the data showed. Many became U.S. citizens, and they have helped the United States accumulate patents, publications and Nobel Prizes.

But in recent years, more scientists have been returning to China, drawn partly by government recruitment programs promising them millions of dollars in funding as well as housing subsidies and other perks. China's spending on research and development is now second only to the United States. And Chinese institutions such as Tsinghua and Zhejiang University now routinely rank among the best in the world for science and technology.

The investment is part of a plan to turn China into a scientific superpower, especially in strategically important fields such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors and biotechnology.

"The scientific and technological revolution is intertwined with the game between superpowers," China's leader, Xi Jinping, said last year.

At the same time, the United States has been pushing scientists away for years, in particular by investigating their ties with China.

Lu Wuyuan, a protein chemist formerly at the University of Maryland, was one of those targeted. He was investigated by the National Institutes of Health for allegedly failing to disclose research ties to China — ties he said Maryland knew about. After 20 years at the university, he quit in 2020.



Professor Lu Wuyuan, a researcher at the Fudan University Medical School, photographed in Shanghai, China on Friday. Qilai Shen for The New York Times

Most of the cases brought under the so-called China Initiative eventually collapsed. Many researchers criticized the campaign as racial profiling.

Professor Lu, who now works at Fudan University in Shanghai, said that many of his friends mused about leaving the United States, but most chose to stay because they had built lives there.

The Trump administration's assault on research funding may change that.

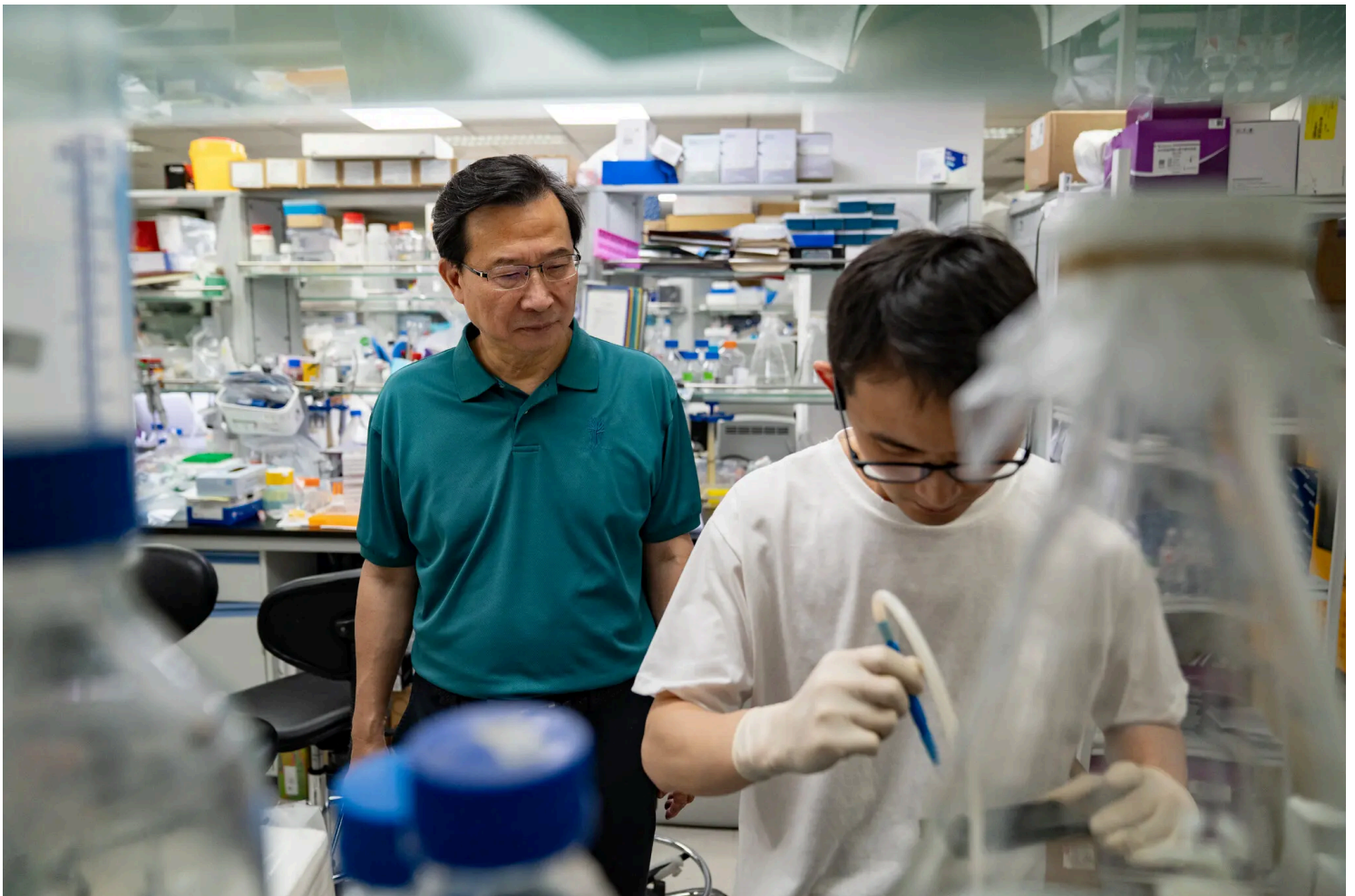
"If they cut so much funding, I believe that may be the last straw for many people," Professor Lu said.

Still, China faces its own issues in poaching talent.

It has become harder for Chinese universities to meet and woo overseas scientists, as Chinese scholars have had trouble securing visas to the United States to attend academic conferences. Researchers in America also face restrictions in visiting China; Texas, for example, prohibits employees of public universities from traveling to China for work.

The scientists who have returned to China largely fall into a few categories: those who are early in their careers, or who are nearing retirement, or who felt pushed out by investigations. Established midcareer scholars are still reluctant to leave, multiple scientists said.

Professor Rao at Peking University, who was also one of Westlake's co-founders, said that China's progress in recruiting international talent had also been hampered by jealousy among domestic colleagues.



Professor Rao Yi, left, watching students doing research in a laboratory at Peking University, in Beijing, on Friday. Andrea Verdelli for The New York Times

“While funding should increase, it is not the key factor at this stage,” Professor Rao said. “Supporting scientists based on merit and their good science is the key.”

And even at home, scientists are not spared political scrutiny. Chinese universities face limits on free expression, and China’s Ministry of State Security has warned that scholars returning from overseas may be spies.

Multiple Chinese-born scientists — both those who had returned to China, and those still in the United States — emphasized that they did not want to get entangled in politics. They were just trying to do good work.

The simple fact was, many agreed, that it was increasingly easier to do so in China.

“It’s hard to survive in America. And China is developing so fast,” said Fu Tianfan, 32, an artificial intelligence researcher who left Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in December to join Nanjing University.

“Whether it was the best choice,” he said, “it may take some time to say.”

Siyi Zhao contributed research.

Vivian Wang is a China correspondent based in Beijing, where she writes about how the country’s global rise and ambitions are shaping the daily lives of its people.