

RESEARCH POLICY

China falls silent about its recruitment efforts

Information about “talent programs” that drew U.S. scrutiny is no longer available

By Dennis Normile

The criminal charges against Harvard University chemist Charles Lieber—and dozens of others ensnared in the U.S. Department of Justice’s China Initiative—have put a spotlight on the Thousand Talents Program (TTP), a Chinese government effort that brought Lieber and other scientists from overseas to China’s universities and research institutes. U.S. authorities have portrayed the program as an effort to pilfer know-how and innovation, a claim many scientists dispute. But as the scrutiny of the TTP grew, the program slipped out of sight.

Official mentions of the TTP have disappeared, and lists of TTP awardees once posted on government and university websites are no longer available. But experts say the TTP has simply been folded into other programs, and recruitment is continuing. More than ever, the effort focuses on scientists of Chinese origin, and part-time appointments of the type that Lieber had become rare.

China launched the TTP in 2008, aiming to boost the country’s research output and quality. At the time, more than 90% of Chinese who earned Ph.D.s in the United States remained there for at least 5 years after completing their studies, according to a May 2020 report by David Zweig and Siqin Kang of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. The TTP offered returnees—and foreign researchers willing to relocate—competitive salaries and funding to establish labs. Although some half-time appointments were allowed, the program aimed for full-time researchers.

There were few takers. So in 2010 the part-time option was expanded, allowing recruits to maintain their jobs overseas if they spent at least part of the year in China. In 2011, close to 75% of 500 TTP scholars Zweig and Kang identified were on part-time agreements. (A 2019 U.S. Senate report claims the TTP had attracted more than 7000 “high-end professionals” by 2017 but didn’t specify how many were part time.)

The program has paid off for China. A 2020 study by Cong Cao, a China sci-

ence policy specialist at the University of Nottingham’s campus in Ningbo, China, showed scholars in China with overseas experience published more papers, and with higher impact, than stay-at-home peers. Universities also benefited from the association with star scientists. Lieber’s presence, for example, may have helped the little-known Wuhan University of Technology (WUT) attract prospective students, says Futao Huang, a higher education scholar at Hiroshima University.

But part-time options like Lieber’s also facilitated “double dipping,” Zweig says, where researchers with full-time posts abroad were also getting handsomely paid for time supposedly spent in China. Lieber’s contract, for example, called for him to

told *Science* in 2020. “The TTP recruited people to build up academic programs, not to steal ideas,” says Jay Siegel, a U.S. chemist who left the University of Zurich in 2013 to head a new pharmacy program at Tianjin University with TTP support. Of 23 academics targeted under the China Initiative, only two have been charged with intellectual property theft (*Science*, 10 December 2021, p. 1306). Lieber was found guilty of lying to federal authorities about his Chinese ties and failing to report the resulting income.

China has responded to the criticism as it often does: by becoming increasingly secretive. Information on the talents programs “seemed to start disappearing around the time that the China Initiative was launched” in 2018, says Emily Weinstein, an analyst at Georgetown University’s Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET). In 2019, the TTP and its spinoffs were absorbed into a High-End Foreign Expert Recruitment Plan, one of 27 currently active national plans, according to CSET, which gleans the information from fleeting mentions on Chinese websites. (Ministries and agencies have their own specialized programs.) “No relevant statistics” are publicly available about recruiting success, says Lu Miao, a policy analyst at the Center for China and Globalization, a Beijing think tank.

Still, the continued existence of the programs “indicates their usefulness to the country,” Cao says. Although most programs are open to non-Chinese, the number moving to China “is probably still insignificant,” he adds.

Siegel, now a Switzerland-based educational consultant, says China’s talent programs have gotten so much bad publicity that U.S. universities “have become reluctant to work with anyone who has any connection to TTP.” Doing so may become illegal as well: The U.S. Congress is considering legislation prohibiting federally funded researchers from participating in China’s talent programs. Siegel and many others think such a step would be misguided. Participation by Americans “brought a lot of U.S. influence into China and Chinese understanding back to the U.S.,” Siegel says. ■



work “at or for” WUT “not less than nine months a year,” according to the indictment against him, in return for a monthly fee of up to \$50,000 and \$1.7 million to set up a lab at WUT. Some Chinese academics complained that nonresident scientists got big salaries and research support for little in return. In 2017, the government clarified that part-timers were to be in China “for no less than 2 months a year,” Huang says.

U.S. authorities took a dim view of the deals for different reasons. “China pays scientists at American universities to secretly bring our knowledge and innovation back to China,” then-FBI Director Christopher Wray said in a July 2020 speech at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C.

Such claims are “simply wrong and false,” Yigong Shi, a molecular biologist who left Princeton University in 2008 to head the life sciences department at Tsinghua University,

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Science, 375 (6578), • DOI: 10.1126/science.ada0235

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