

‘Which side are you on?’

Chinese-Americans form a cornerstone of the US scientific workforce. Yet recent developments have led some to question whether they are fully accepted by their colleagues. Josette Chen reports.

Since the late 1960s, when the excesses of the Cultural Revolution caused many Chinese researchers to flee to the United States, Chinese-Americans have moved to a central position within US science. As other minorities struggled to increase their representation in US labs, Chinese-Americans were seen as an unqualified success story, with few worries about integration and discrimination.

But the arrest in December 1999 of Wen Ho Lee, a fluid-dynamicist working on nuclear-weapons research at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, changed the landscape. Pursuing allegations that China had acquired designs for advanced US nuclear warheads, the Federal Bureau of Investigation charged Lee with 59 counts of mishandling classified information, subjected him to repeated aggressive interrogations and held him in solitary confinement for nine months.

By the time Lee was released — having admitted one minor infringement but otherwise cleared of wrongdoing — many Chinese-American scientists were rethinking their assumptions about successful integration into the US research community. Lee, born in Taiwan but a naturalized American, was widely seen as the victim of barely concealed racism. Some Chinese-American scientists began to suspect that they, too, were perceived as ‘foreigners’ with divided loyalties. “History shows that Chinese-Americans get blamed for what China does,” claims Dorothy Ng, who works in the Structural and Applied Mechanics Group at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California.

If such attitudes were indeed lurking below the surface, some Chinese-Americans wondered if they might be manifest in more subtle ways. Missed promotions, perhaps? Or salary discrepancies? The result was an unprecedented upsurge of activism, as Chinese-Americans sought to assert their rights. At Los Alamos and other US weapons labs, this activity was especially intense, with researchers challenging their employers’ record for equal opportunities in promotions and salaries, and railing against the inclusion of ‘racial profiling’ within the labs’ security procedures. Two academic groups, Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education and the Association for Asian American Studies, even urged Chinese-Americans to



Touchstone issue: the arrest of Wen Ho Lee (right) raised concerns about discrimination against Chinese-American researchers.

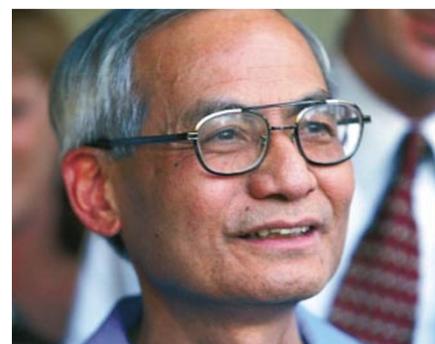
mount an employment boycott of the labs.

A year on, *Nature’s* enquiries reveal that opinion among the Chinese-American research community is divided over the progress that has been made since the issues were brought out into the open — and even over the extent to which discrimination poses a problem. But there is a general wariness over how recent developments that have strengthened the perception of China as the United States’ main adversary are likely to affect attitudes towards Chinese-Americans.

Rising tension

Since President George W. Bush came to office in February, his administration has repeatedly locked horns with China, clashing over the sale of US arms to Taiwan and the dramatic incident that saw a US electronic surveillance aircraft forced to land in China after colliding with a Chinese jet fighter. In April, at the height of these tensions, an opinion poll commissioned by the Committee of 100, which lobbies for Chinese-American rights, suggested that many Americans view fellow citizens of Chinese descent with distrust.

That poll asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of



stereotypes — and so might have been likely to provoke racist sentiments. But Ng, for one, believes some of the negative attitudes that it highlighted have spilled over into the scientific community. After the spyplane incident, she says: “I was asked at work which side I was on.” Ng complains that she is expected to take a ‘Chinese’ view on such issues, even though she has lived in the United States for 23 years. “They have not accepted us as countrymen,” she asserts.

Yet for every Chinese-American scientist who is concerned about geopolitical tensions fuelling discrimination, it seems that there is another who does not perceive a problem. “There have been ups and downs at the government level, but this has not affected my personal research area,” says Zhexi Luo, a palaeontologist at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. “Scientists are very open-minded,” agrees Yixian Zheng, an embryologist at the Carnegie Institution of Washington in Baltimore, Maryland.

This divergence of views may, in part, reflect the distance of individual researchers from the centre of last year’s storm — the national weapons laboratories. And when

judging the progress made since the Lee case, these labs are a good place to start.

The weapons labs are the responsibility of the Department of Energy (DOE). In summer 1999, as the storm surrounding alleged Chinese espionage at the labs grew, Bill Richardson, then energy secretary, set up a task force to examine accusations of racial discrimination in the labs' security-profiling procedures. Its recommendations, delivered in January 2000, included establishing a post of national ombudsman for the DOE to deal with such complaints. In April this year, Spencer Abraham, Richardson's successor in the Bush administration, issued a memo that pledged to eliminate racial profiling.

Slow progress

But some scientists complain that things are moving more slowly at the grass-roots level. Shao-Ping Chen, a physicist at Los Alamos, was prominent in last year's campaign to challenge the lab's administration over equal opportunities in salaries and promotion. He also sits on Los Alamos' Asian-Pacific Islander Career Enhancement Task Force, set up by lab director John Browne. "Management is moving in a positive direction, but not as fast as I'd like," Chen says.

Although Chen was promoted to a managerial position in April, he believes problems with discrimination have not been completely resolved — and he is convinced that salary discrepancies remain. In January, Los Alamos asked a consulting firm to investigate the issue. Its report, completed in May, concluded there were no significant salary differences between scientists from an Asian or Pacific Island ethnic background and other Americans. But Chen feels that the report did not provide enough data on qualifications and experience to allow meaningful comparisons.

The additional security measures imposed following the investigations into spying have also created problems. All foreign trips and contacts are now being closely monitored, and security clearance to work on classified projects has become more difficult to obtain. Chen is himself still waiting for clearance after applying some 18 months ago. Chen is not sure if his status as a Chinese-American has hindered the process — but he says that anyone with contacts in 'sensitive' countries will be looked at more closely.

Lawrence Livermore, meanwhile, faces a lawsuit filed by nine Asian-American scientists and engineers alleging bias in hiring, salaries and promotions. The plaintiffs claim there is a salary gap averaging \$922 per month between them and their white counterparts.

Calls for an employment boycott have also taken their toll, with appointments of Asians and Asian-Americans to postdoctoral positions at the weapons labs falling from 14% of the total in 1998 to 7% in 2000. Ling-chi Wang, an ethnic studies professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who led calls

for a boycott, believes it has prompted some progress. But he fears this has been "blown away" by a recent incident involving Representative David Wu (Democrat, Oregon).

In May, Wu was invited to speak at the DOE's headquarters to celebrate Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Turning up at a side entrance, he was briefly denied access — despite his congressional identification — because he could not prove his US citizenship. In a formal complaint, Wu told energy secretary Abraham that he suspected the incident was "an indicator of a much larger problem at DOE", and has asked for a review of employment practices and operating procedures to prevent future discrimination.

David Ho, director of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center in New York and a member of the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, believes that such problems are less acute in the wider scientific community. But again, he is concerned about the impact recent tensions between the United States and China will have on attitudes towards Chinese-American scientists.

There are also concerns about the flow of young scientists from China into US research labs. This is widely felt to benefit both countries, and some researchers fear that recent events may deter bright young Chinese from visiting the United States. "If we lose them, it won't be good for US science," warns Cheuk-Yin Wong, a nuclear physicist at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee and former chairman of the Overseas Chinese Physics Association.

Away from the weapons labs, at least, there seems to be no cause for immediate alarm. Nai Phuan Ong, a physicist at Princeton University in New Jersey, says that student admissions in his department have not been affected. Given political tensions, Chinese scientists "may feel bad or worry" about

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Ground zero: the Los Alamos National Laboratory has been accused of 'racial profiling'.

coming to the United States, he says. But the draw of working in the world's leading scientific nation remains strong — and many young Chinese researchers are in contact with friends working in the United States who can relate positive experiences.

As Chinese-Americans worry about their status within US society, politicians are reacting to their concerns. Last month, Senator Dianne Feinstein (Democrat, California) drew attention to "the growing web of suspicion" surrounding Asian-Americans and asked President Bush to "redouble our efforts to eliminate racial stereotypes".

Such stereotypes, argue Chinese-American scientists, are as unwelcome in the lab as anywhere else. As the Carnegie Museum's Luo puts it: "Truly good science should have no boundaries, no ethnic attitudes."

Josette Chen has just completed an internship at Nature.



Sour times: the forced landing of a US surveillance aircraft in China sparked an international incident.



JOE RAEDLE/NEWSMAKERS

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