

FEATURE

MIT president criticises Washington for ‘unfounded suspicions’ about Chinese academics

- L. Rafael Reif tells Massachusetts Institute of Technology community that researchers of Chinese background feel ‘stigmatised and on edge’
- Reif’s letter comes as US government has stepped up its scrutiny of mainland Chinese on many fronts

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3016078/mit-president-criticises-washington-unfounded-suspicions-about-chinese>



MIT president L. Rafael Reif (left) has decried the climate of suspicion Washington has created around Chinese academics.

Photo: Reuters

Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s president has accused the US government of creating “a toxic atmosphere” for academics of Chinese descent in its efforts to prevent Beijing from acquiring advanced American technology.

“I am well aware of the risks of academic espionage and MIT has established prudent policies to protect against such breaches,” L. Rafael Reif said in a letter to the school’s faculty, students, staff and alumni.

“But we must take great care not to create a toxic atmosphere of unfounded suspicion and fear. Looking at cases across the nation, small numbers of researchers of Chinese background may indeed have acted in bad faith, but they are the exception and very far from the rule.

“Yet faculty members, post-docs, research staff and students tell me that, in their dealings with government agencies, they now feel unfairly scrutinised, stigmatised and on edge – because of their Chinese ethnicity alone,” Reif wrote.

MIT was one of many American universities to end funding ties with Chinese telecoms equipment makers Huawei Technologies and ZTE, citing the risks that such arrangements might cause in the light of US federal investigations of the two companies.

MIT – rated third in US News and World Report’s ranking of American universities – announced its decision in April after Stanford University, the University of California’s flagship Berkeley campus and Princeton

University all cut future research collaborations with Huawei.

The US government has stepped up its scrutiny of mainland Chinese individuals and entities on many fronts.

US President Donald Trump used concerns about transfers of US technology to Chinese companies as part of his justification for a trade war he launched nearly a year ago.

A few weeks later, US lawmakers used the same pretext to pass a new law that greatly expands the national security review role of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the US.

FBI director Christopher Wray told the Senate Intelligence Committee last year that China had aggressively placed operatives at universities, including professors, scientists and students and that the bureau must monitor them from its field offices across the nation.

Many academics displayed “a level of naivete” about the level of China’s infiltration, he said.



Reif's letter urges the MIT community to avoid a "toxic atmosphere". Photo: Reuters

Without mentioning these comments specifically, Reif called suspicion based on race or national origin “heartbreaking”.

He referred to the architect and MIT alumnus Ieoh Ming Pei as an example of someone of Chinese descent who had made great contributions to America in the form of “iconic buildings from Boston to Paris and China to Washington DC, as well on our own campus”.

“By his own account, he consciously stayed alive to his Chinese roots all his life,” Reif said. “Yet, when he died at the age of 102, The

Boston Globe described him as the most prominent American architect of his generation.

“Thanks to the inspired American system that also made room for me as an immigrant, all of those facts can be true at the same time.”

Reif, president of MIT since 2012, was born and raised in Venezuela. He moved to the US in 1979 to earn a doctoral degree in electrical engineering at Stanford and joined the MIT faculty in 1980.

Letter to the MIT community: Immigration is a kind of oxygen

MIT News Office

June 25, 2019

<http://news.mit.edu/2019/letter-community-immigration-is-oxygen-0625>

The following email was sent today to the MIT community by President L. Rafael Reif.

To the members of the MIT community,

MIT has flourished, like the United States itself, because it has been a magnet for the world's finest talent, a global laboratory where people from every culture and background inspire each other and invent the future, together.

Today, I feel compelled to share my dismay about some circumstances painfully relevant to our fellow MIT community members of Chinese descent. And I believe that because we treasure them as friends and colleagues, their situation and its larger national context should concern us all.

The situation

As the US and China have struggled with rising tensions, the US government has raised serious concerns about incidents of alleged academic espionage conducted by individuals through what is widely understood as a systematic effort of the Chinese government to acquire high-tech IP.

As head of an institute that includes MIT Lincoln Laboratory, I could not take national security more seriously. I am well aware of the risks of academic espionage, and MIT has established prudent policies to protect against such breaches.

But in managing these risks, we must take great care not to create a toxic atmosphere of unfounded suspicion and fear. Looking at cases across the nation, small numbers of researchers of Chinese background may indeed have acted in bad faith, but they are the exception and very far from the rule. Yet faculty members, post-docs, research staff and students tell me that, in their dealings with government agencies, they now feel unfairly scrutinized, stigmatized and on edge - because of their Chinese ethnicity alone.

Nothing could be further from - or more corrosive to - our community's collaborative strength and open-hearted ideals. To hear such reports from Chinese and Chinese-American colleagues is heartbreaking. As scholars, teachers, mentors, inventors and entrepreneurs, they have been not only exemplary members of our community but exceptional contributors to American society. I am deeply troubled that they feel themselves repaid with generalized mistrust and disrespect.

The signal to the world

For those of us who know firsthand the immense value of MIT's global community and of the free flow of scientific ideas, it is important to understand the distress of these colleagues as part of an increasingly loud signal the US is sending to the world.

Protracted visa delays. Harsh rhetoric against most immigrants and a range of other groups, because of religion, race, ethnicity or national origin. Together, such actions and policies have turned the volume all the way up on the message that the US is closing the door - that we no longer seek to be a magnet

for the world's most driven and creative individuals. I believe this message is not consistent with how America has succeeded. I am certain it is not how the Institute has succeeded. And we should expect it to have serious long-term costs for the nation and for MIT.

For the record, let me say with warmth and enthusiasm to every member of MIT's intensely global community: We are glad, proud and fortunate to have you with us! To our alumni around the world: We remain one community, united by our shared values and ideals! And to all the rising talent out there: If you are passionate about making a better world, and if you dream of joining our community, we welcome your creativity, we welcome your unstoppable energy and aspiration - and we hope you can find a way to join us.

* * *

In May, the world lost a brilliant creative force: architect I.M. Pei, MIT Class of 1940. Raised in Shanghai and Hong Kong, he came to the United States at 17 to seek an education. He left a legacy of iconic buildings from Boston to Paris and China to Washington, DC, as well on our own campus. By his own account, he consciously stayed alive to his Chinese roots all his life. Yet, when he died at the age of 102, the Boston Globe described him as "the most prominent American architect of his generation."

Thanks to the inspired American system that also made room for me as an immigrant, all of those facts can be true at the same time.

As I have discovered through 40 years in academia, the hidden strength of a university is that every fall, it is refreshed by a new tide of students. I am equally convinced that part of the genius of America is that it is continually refreshed by immigration - by the passionate energy, audacity, ingenuity and drive of people hungry for a better life.

There is certainly room for a wide range of serious positions on the actions necessary to ensure our national security and to manage and improve our nation's immigration system. But above the noise of the current moment, the signal I believe we should be sending, loud and clear, is that the story of American immigration is essential to understanding how the US became, and remains, optimistic, open-minded, innovative and prosperous - a story of never-ending renewal.

In a nation like ours, immigration is a kind of oxygen, each fresh wave reenergizing the body as a whole. As a society, when we offer immigrants the gift of opportunity, we receive in return vital fuel for our shared future. I trust that this wisdom will always guide us in the life and work of MIT. And I hope it can continue to guide our nation.

Sincerely,

L. Rafael Reif