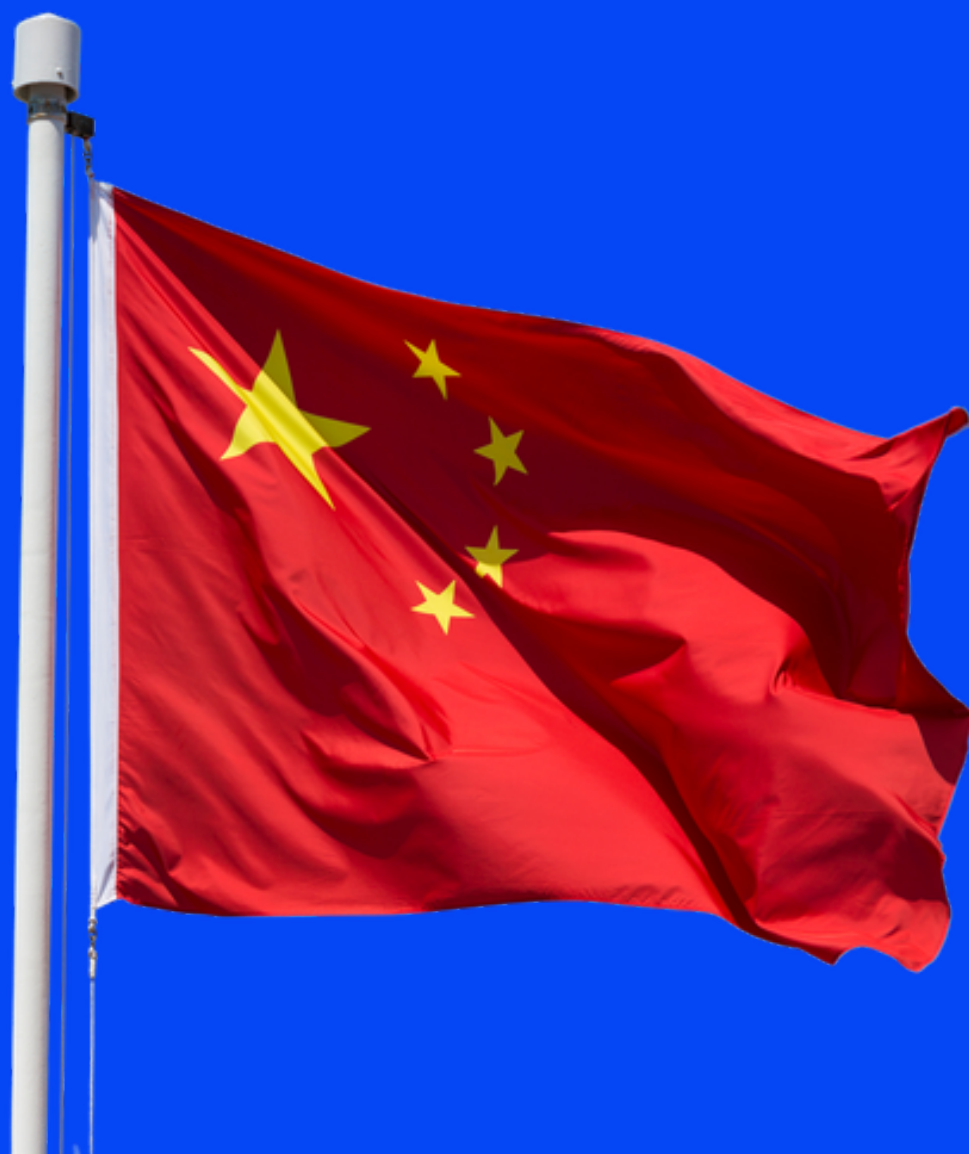


When a Nobel Laureate Moves, a **Nation Keeps Score**

A Case of the U.S. Brain Drain.

The story uncovers China's long-term acquisition strategy. Simultaneously, the appointment gives China both research capacity and reputational standing.



▀ WHERE THE BRAIN-DRAIN STORY BEGINS

A working Nobel laureate has left UC Berkeley for **Tsinghua's full-time role.**



image source: Tsinghua University

CN

Tsinghua University

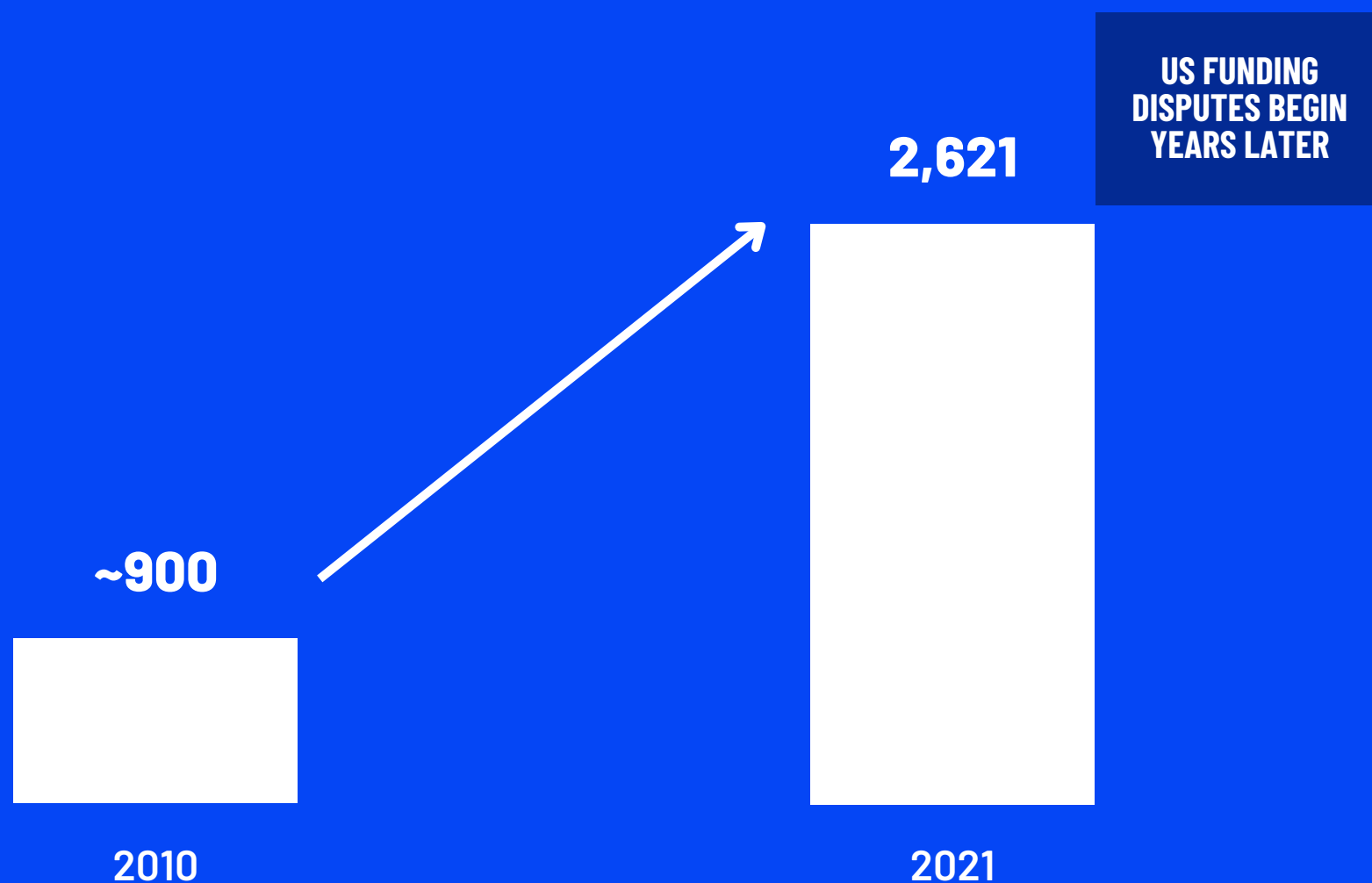
Beijing · 3 July 2026

- ▀ **Omar Yaghi**, co-recipient of the **2025 Nobel Prize** in Chemistry, has left his endowed chair at UC Berkeley to lead a new AI Chemistry and Materials Research Institute at Tsinghua, where he was received with a high-profile campus welcome.
- ▀ Yaghi has **pointed to declining research funding** as one factor in the decision, telling Scientific American, in remarks relayed by Nature, that US science is **"not so encouraging because of the cutting back on grants."**

His departure adds weight to the question of whether **the US can retain senior scientific talent**, as domestic support tightens and rival nations extend superior-resourced offers.

THE OUTFLOW PREDATES THE FUNDING CUTS

However, departures nearly tripled in a decade, **before any funding issue.**



Annual departures of US-based scientists of Chinese descent have risen steadily, from roughly 900 in 2010 to 2,621 in 2021, counting moves to all destinations (Xie et al., PNAS 2023).

The outflow reaches well into the **senior ranks**; Princeton researchers estimate that between **70 and 100** well-established Chinese and Chinese-American scientists have left the US each year since 2018. If sustained, an outflow of this composition risks eroding American scientific competitiveness.

CHINA BUILT A LONG-TERM RECRUITMENT PIPELINE



'China Initiative' accelerated the exits **Beijing was prepared to receive.**

NOV 2018

The Department of Justice launches the **China Initiative**, and academics with ties to China come under investigation.

SEP 2020

Song-Chun Zhu leaves UCLA after 28 years in the US and founds BIGAI in Beijing, holding chairs at Peking and Tsinghua.

2021

Departures reach **2,621 a year**. Among surveyed researchers, **72%** report feeling unsafe, and **61%** say they have considered leaving.

FEB 2022

The DOJ ends the Initiative amid criticism over profiling. The outflow has not reversed.

INVESTIGATION
CLIMATE

FELT UNSAFE

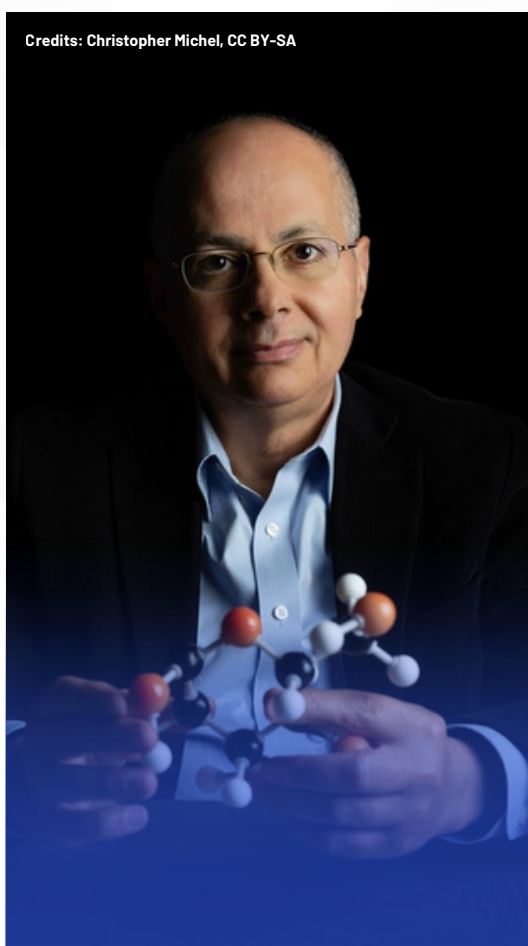
SENIOR EXIT

BEIJING PROVIDES THE
PLATFORM

Zhu did not publicly attribute his departure to the China Initiative. His timing nonetheless tracks the escalation of federal scrutiny, an alignment that points to association rather than direct causation.

The case indicates that rising or perceived costs of staying in the US can accelerate outbound flows even where no formal action is taken against the individual.

CHINA BUILT A LONG-TERM RECRUITMENT PIPELINE



Omar Yaghi's move was four years in the making.

JAN 2022

Honorary professorship at Tsinghua opens the relationship.

2025

Yaghi was elected a **foreign member** of the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

3 JUL 2026

A full-time chair and a welcome ceremony complete the sequence.

**HONORARY
AFFILIATION**

**ACADEMY
MEMBERSHIP**

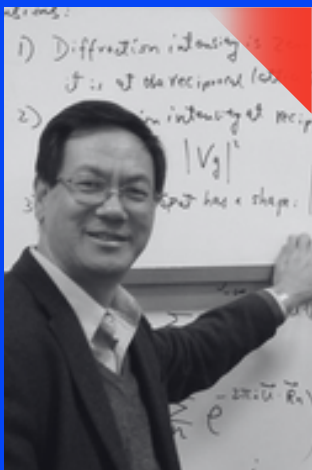
**FULL-TIME
POST**

**CEREMONY AND
STATE MEDIA**

The pattern points to a **strategic recruitment pipeline**, in which each stage strengthens ties before the next offer is extended.

Many of China's 2026 recruits, Yaghi among them, had established connections with Chinese institutions well before US funding cuts intensified. **A phased approach is likely to raise the odds of eventual relocation**, particularly as domestic constraints in the US mount.

China attracts talent at all **career stages** and from **multiple directions**.



US **Zhong Lin Wang**
 Georgia Tech, US
 Senior
 Director, Beijing Institute of Nanoenergy (2010s)

Chenpengfei12345 · Wikimedia · CC BY-SA 4.0



US **Yang Dan**
 UC Berkeley, US
 Senior
 Senior post, Shenzhen Medical Academy (2025), after 35 years in the US.

HHMI



US **Liu Jun**
 Harvard, US
 Senior
 Chair, Tsinghua (2025)

Tsinghua University



SG **Gao Huajian**
 NTU, SG
 Senior
 Tsinghua (Jan 2024)

Univ. of Vermont · Wikimedia · CC BY 3.0



US **Omar Yaghi**
 UC Berkeley, US
 Senior, Nobel laureate
 Institute lead, Tsinghua (2026)

Christopher Michel · Wikimedia · CC BY-SA 4.0



FR **Gérard Mourou**
 École Polytechnique, FR
 Senior · Nobel laureate, 80
 Chair, Peking University (Oct 2024)

École polytechnique · Wikimedia · CC BY-SA 2.0



Hartmut Michel



Max Planck (emeritus), DE



Senior · Nobel laureate, 77



Full-time, Jilin University
(Apr 2026)

Shauchungshin · Wikimedia · CC BY-SA 4.0



Seeram Ramakrishna



NUS, SG



Senior



Tsinghua's highest
professorial title
(Sep 2025)

National University of Singapore



Stephen Lin Er Chow



Singapore, SG



Early-career, 28



"100 Young Professors,
" Zhejiang Univ. (2025)

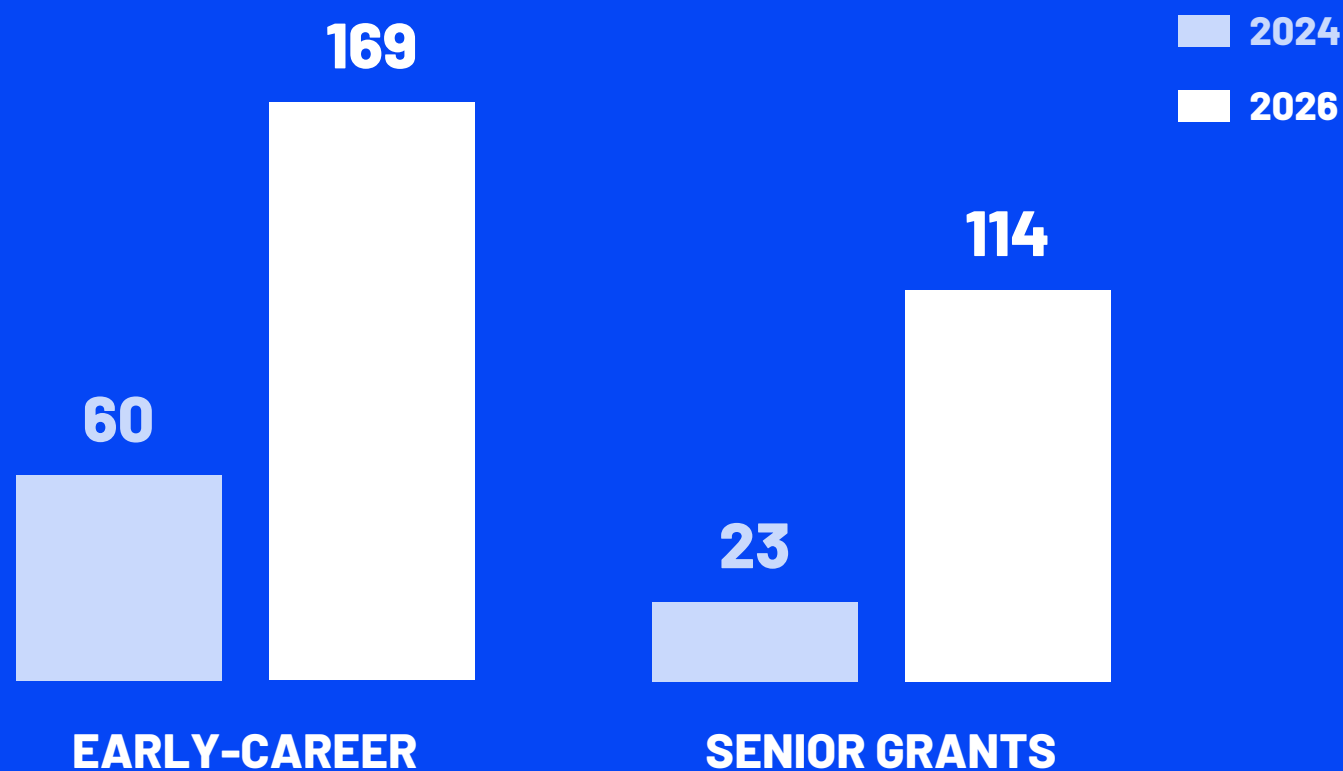
The Rakyat Post · Zhejiang University

The current wave of talent migration to China draws from the **US, Europe, and Singapore**, spanning career stages from Nobel laureates in their seventies to early-career professors in their twenties. Suggesting that China's pull as a scientific destination is widening, rather than resting on a handful of headline recruits.

Europe is **absorbing part of the outflow** and competing with China.

US-BASED APPLICATIONS TO THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL

Applications signal interest rather than arrivals.



EU

European Union. "Choose Europe for Science" set aside **€500M**, which has since been raised to **€900M** through 2027, to attract departing US researchers.

FR

France. Committed funding to relocate dozens of US-based scientists.

ERC

ERC. Plus Grants (**€210M**, Jun 2026) offer relocating scientists up to **€2M** in additional funding to establish laboratories in Europe.

CN

China. Competes on prestige as well as pay; a laureate ceremony confers a reputational signal that a matching salary alone cannot.

A star recruit delivers **two returns** from a single appointment.



China's recent acquisitions involve a handful of scientists, yet **the visibility and soft-power gains they generate are substantial**, above all when the recruit is a working Nobel laureate.

Sustained recruitment of this kind is likely to build China's global scientific stature. A single Nobel ceremony at Tsinghua can do more for China's reputation as a scientific hub than dozens of unpublicized mid-career appointments. In that calculation, visibility and soft power appear to weigh as heavily as the talent itself.

THE WORLD IS ALREADY RE-RATING CHINA'S SCIENCE BRAND

The brand behind the recruitment is **independently credible.**

#1

Nature Index, natural sciences. Output rose **22.4%** in a year, the only double-digit growth in the global top 10.

13 yrs

The Chinese Academy of Sciences has been the world's top research institution for **13** straight years, and nine of the top **10** globally are Chinese.

27.2%

China's share of the world's top 1% most-cited papers, compared to **24.9%** for the US. First place, up from **13th** two decades ago.

These rankings measure research output rather than migration, yet they supply the credibility that gives each high-profile recruitment its impact.

CNN has framed the shift plainly; in the global competition for top talent, **China is closing the gap with the US.** China's growing research stature makes each recruitment ceremony carry greater weight, and each ceremony, in turn, helps reinforce its standing as a rising scientific power.

The United States faces a **persistent, well-documented outflow of talent** across career stages.

What China demonstrated in July 2026 is the capacity to convert a single high-profile departure into a soft-power victory. Each such event now **serves China twice, once as a research gain and once as a story.**



More insights at nationbrandresearch.com

China's Talent Acquisition:
A Case of the U.S. Brain Drain.



References

- Ahart, J., & Basu, M. (2026, July 8). Nobel-winning chemist leaves US to direct AI materials lab in China. Nature. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-026-02143-x>
- Center for Security and Emerging Technology. (2022). Spotlight on Beijing Institute for General Artificial Intelligence. Georgetown University. <https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/CSET-Spotlight-on-Beijing-Institute-for-General-Artificial-Intelligence-1.pdf>
- Chinese Academy of Sciences. (2025, November 21). Chinese Academy of Sciences elects members and foreign members. https://english.cas.cn/head/202511/t20251121_1132702.shtml
- CNN. (2025, September 29). In the race to attract the world's smartest minds, China is gaining on the US. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/29/china/china-reverse-brain-drain-science-tech-competition-us-intl-hnk>
- European Commission. (2025, May). Choose Europe for Science initiative (€500M, raised to €900M through 2027). Coverage via Dispatches Europe: <https://dispatcheseurope.com/europe-pivoting-to-attract-american-researchers-and-scientists-fleeing-trump/>
- European Research Council. (2026, June 2). ERC Plus Grant. <https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/erc-plus-grant>
- European Research Council. (2026, June). ERC Advanced Grants: Nearly €840 million to support Europe's leading researchers. <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/news/erc-2025-advanced-grants-results>
- Joseph, A. (2025, December 17). Amid talk of a brain drain, some scientists leave U.S. behind. STAT News. <https://www.statnews.com/2025/12/17/research-cuts-fuel-scientific-brain-drain-american-science-shattered/>
- National Institute of Science and Technology Policy (NISTEP). (2022). Japanese science and technology indicators: China's share of top-1% most-cited papers. Via <https://www.science.org/content/article/china-rises-first-place-most-cited-papers>
- Nature. (2026). US applications for prestigious European research grants surge. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-026-00362-w>
- South China Morning Post. (2024). Prize-winning US physicist Gao Huajian returns to China after decades overseas. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3248720/prize-winning-us-physicist-gao-huajian-returns-china-after-decades-overseas>
- South China Morning Post. (2024, October). French Nobel-winning laser scientist Gerard Mourou joins China's top university. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3283624/french-nobel-winning-laser-scientist-gerard-mourou-joins-chinas-top-university>
- South China Morning Post. (2025). Top neuroscientist Dan Yang leaves US for China, reunites with mentor-husband Mu-ming Poo. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3311992/top-neuroscientist-dan-yang-leaves-us-china-reunites-mentor-husband-mu-ming-poo>
- South China Morning Post. (2025). Top Harvard mathematician Liu Jun leaves US for China. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3324637/top-harvard-mathematician-liu-jun-leaves-us-china>
- South China Morning Post. (2026). Nobel laureate biochemist Hartmut Michel joins Jilin University in China. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3351541/nobel-laureate-biochemist-hartmut-michel-joins-jilin-university-china>
- South China Morning Post. (2026). Top Singaporean materials scientist Seeram Ramakrishna joins China's Tsinghua University. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3348141/top-singaporean-materials-scientist-seeram-ramakrishna-joins-chinas-tsinghua-university>
- Springer Nature. (2026, June). Nature Index annual tables: China extends lead in global research rankings. <https://www.natureasia.com/en/info/press-releases/detail/8966>
- Tsinghua University. (2026, July). Nobel Laureate in Chemistry Omar M. Yaghi joins Tsinghua University full-time. <https://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/en/info/1244/14984.htm>
- U.S. Department of Justice. (2018, November 1). Attorney General Jeff Sessions announces new initiative to combat Chinese economic espionage. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-jeff-sessions-announces-new-initiative-combat-chinese-economic-espionage>
- U.S. Department of Justice. (2022, February 23). Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen delivers remarks on countering nation-state threats. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/assistant-attorney-general-matthew-olsen-delivers-remarks-countering-nation-state-threats>
- Wikipedia. (2026). Beijing Institute for General Artificial Intelligence. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beijing_Institute_for_General_Artificial_Intelligence
- Wikipedia. (2026). Zhong Lin Wang. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhong_Lin_Wang
- Xie, Y., Lin, X., Li, J., He, Q., & Huang, J. (2023). Caught in the crossfire: Fears of Chinese-American scientists. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 120(27). <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2216248120>