

***The Costs of U.S.-China Militarized Rivalry for Chinese and Asian Americans:
Hate Crimes, Unjust Targeting of Scholars, and Legal Exclusions***

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Summary

Within the United States, the militarized U.S.-China rivalry has fueled anti-Asian racism, particularly towards Chinese Americans. In the past five years, there has been a rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans. Chinese American scholars and students have been targeted as potential spies because of their heritage, and in some U.S. states, Chinese nationals and Chinese Americans have been excluded from purchasing land and homes. This discrimination goes against the U.S. values of human rights and equality for all. Strategically, it contributes to the U.S. losing the international talent competition and harms U.S. economic interests.

Introduction

The U.S. government, like other governments, has a history of discriminating against particular groups and individuals within its borders, in conjunction with aligned foreign policy. Perhaps the most recent and extreme instance was the abuse of the human rights and civil liberties of Muslims and Arabs within the U.S., as well as people of color, migrants, and activists, after the U.S. government launched the “Global War on Terror,” following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.² More recently, discriminatory policies and accompanying hate crimes have intensified against Asian Americans, and particularly Chinese Americans, since the U.S. government under the first Trump administration (2017 – 2021) began framing China as an existential threat. As the militarized relationship with China continued to amplify anti-China rhetoric in the U.S., many Chinese Americans worried that a long history of discriminatory and exclusionary actions against Chinese Americans, initially codified in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, would be reactivated.

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² *Human Rights and Civil Liberties*. (2025, June). Cost of War, The Watson School of International and Public Affairs, Brown University. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/social/rights>

Indeed, anti-Asian American and anti-Chinese American racism reached unprecedented levels after COVID-19 spread from China to the U.S. and other parts of the world in 2020. A wave of high-profile hate crimes targeting Asian individuals skyrocketed and drew national ire after eight women in Atlanta, six of them of Asian origin, were killed in a mass shooting in March 2021. Data published by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism revealed that anti-Asian hate crimes increased 124 percent from 2019 to 2020 and 339 percent from 2020 to 2021.³ Stop AAPI Hate counted nearly 11,500 hate crimes against Asian Americans nationwide from March 2020 to March 2022.⁴

Anti-Asian hate crimes continued to surge after the pandemic. A 2024 survey showed that 61% of Asian Americans felt that hate toward them increased rather than went down during 2023-2024. Another survey in the same year revealed that one in five Asian American adults in New York City reported being physically assaulted in the past 12 months.⁵

Among many causes for the rise of anti-Asian racism is the accusations that COVID-19 was a “China virus.” President Donald Trump used stigmatizing language to describe the pandemic through mocking nicknames such as “Wuhan virus” (the city where the first COVID case was discovered), which led to inaccurate perceptions that threatened Asian Americans.⁶ Roughly two months after the first confirmed COVID-19 case in the U.S, 60% of Asian Americans reported having witnessed someone blaming people of Asian background for the epidemic.⁷

But the surge of anti-Asian racism did not begin with, nor did it end with, COVID-19. This report argues that anti-Asian and anti-Chinese American racism has intensified along with the militarized U.S.-China rivalry that has escalated in the past decade, and particularly since President Trump launched a trade war against China in 2018.⁸

³ Levin, B. & Perst, K. 2022. *Report to the Nation: 2020s – Dawn of a Decade of Rising Hate*. Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, California State University San Bernardino.

<https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/2022-08/Report%20To%20The%20Nation8-4-22.pdf>

⁴ Stop AAPI Hate. (2022, July). *Two Years and Thousands of Voices, National Report (Through March 31, 2022)*. <https://stopaapihate.org/2022/07/20/year-2-report/>

⁵ Boodhoo, N. (2024, May 1). Scoop: Asian Americans fear hate crimes are rising. *AXIOS*.

<https://www.axios.com/2024/05/01/asian-americans-hate-crime-fear>

⁶ Reja, M. (2021, March 18). Trump's 'Chinese Virus' tweet helped lead to rise in racist anti-Asian Twitter content: Study. *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/trumps-chinese-virus-tweet-helped-lead-rise-racist/story?id=76530148>

⁷ Findling, M., Blendon, R., Benson J., Koh, H. (2022, April 12). COVID-19 Has Driven Racism And Violence Against Asian Americans: Perspectives from 12 National Polls. *Health Affairs*. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/content/forefront/covid-19-has-driven-racism-and-violence-against-asian-americans-perspectives-12>

⁸ This report uses the terms “Chinese American” and “Asian- American” interchangeably because negative treatment of Asian Americans is at least in part a spillover effect of many Americans perception of their phenotypic and cultural similarities with Chinese Americans.

According to one credible account, Trump began using the term “China virus” after a spokesperson from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian, said, “The virus was brought to China by the U.S. Army” on March 12, 2020. Zhao then made a series of statements claiming that COVID-19 originated at a U.S. government research lab in Fort Detrick, Maryland. That impact was so strong on President Trump that he tweeted about the “China Virus” on March 16.⁹ This geopolitical spat reveals that the pandemic itself was not the sole cause for Trump’s racist tweets. Moreover, while President Trump’s rhetoric was a driver for the rise of anti-Asian racism during the pandemic, anti-Asian attacks continued to rise during the subsequent Biden administration, which was much more conscious of the need to protect racial equality than the Trump administration.¹⁰

As part of the U.S.-China rivalry, American media often blurred the lines between Chinese people and Chinese Americans. For example, some stock images and footage accompanying ominous voiceovers about China featured Chinatowns in the U.S.¹¹ Believing that Chinese Americans were more loyal to their country of origin than the U.S., some Americans misperceived individuals from other Asian countries to be Chinese,¹² often ignoring the ethnic diversity that exists within Asian communities. A 2025 survey by the Asian American Foundation revealed that 27% of Americans said Chinese Americans were a threat to society and national security. Forty percent of Americans believed Asian Americans were more loyal to their countries of origin than the U.S., double the percentage who believed this in 2021, a reflection of a rising belief in perpetual foreignness.¹³ According to a 2023 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report, “perpetrators of anti-Asian violence may see all Asians as ‘foreign,’ ‘other,’ or ‘threatening,’ regardless of whether ‘the person was from China, of Chinese origin, or simply looks Asian.’”¹⁴ This perspective makes all Asian people vulnerable to becoming a victims of anti-Asian, particularly anti-Chinese American racism and hate crimes.

This article argues that the militarized U.S.–China rivalry has fueled anti-Asian, especially anti–Chinese American, racism through hate crimes, unjust

⁹ Davis, B. (2024, December 22). Miles Yu on the Past and Future of Trump and China. *The Wire China*. <https://www.thewirechina.com/2024/12/22/miles-yu-on-the-past-and-future-of-trump-and-china/>

¹⁰ American Progress Report. (2022, February 17). *Advancing Equity: Review of the Biden Administration’s Efforts in Its First Year To Implement a Racial Equity Agenda*. CAP. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/advancing-equity-review-of-the-biden-administrations-efforts-in-its-first-year-to-implement-a-racial-equity-agenda/>

¹¹ Lyden, J. (2010, October 27). Critics Say Political Ads Hint Of Xenophobia. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2010/10/27/130860571/critics-say-political-ads-hint-of-xenophobia>

¹² Lee, J. (2022, May 18). Confronting the invisibility of anti-Asian racism. *Brookings Institution*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/confronting-the-invisibility-of-anti-asian-racism/>

¹³ The Asian American Foundation. (2025) *Five Years of the Staatus Index, 2025, Attitudes towards Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders*. <https://www.taaf.org/our-work/staatus-index-2025>

¹⁴ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. (2023). *The Federal Response to Anti-Asian Racism in the United States: 2023 Statutory Report*. https://www.usccr.gov/files/2023-09/fy-2023-se-report_0.pdf

security targeting, and legal exclusions, undermining American values and harming U.S. scientific, economic, and strategic interests. It is divided into four sections to make the argument. The first section situates the recent surge of anti-Asian and anti-Chinese American racism in the broader context of the militarization of U.S.–China relations. The second section examines how great-power rivalry and threat inflation have translated into the unjust targeting of Chinese American scholars and students through national security policies such as the China Initiative. The third section analyzes the strategic and economic costs of this discrimination, especially the loss of scientific talent and the erosion of U.S. competitiveness. The fourth section places recent state-level restrictions on land and home ownership in the historical context of the Chinese Exclusion Act and earlier “alien land laws.” The conclusion reflects on the implications of these trends for American values, civil rights, and the future of U.S.–China relations, and calls for policies that protect both national security and racial equality.

U.S.-China Militarized Rivalry

The U.S.-China relationship has always included competitive and cooperative interests.¹⁵ While cooperative interests were in the driving seat for decades, competitive interests became the driving force after the 2008 global financial crisis. China weathered the crisis better than the U.S. and other Western countries. Chinese leaders believed the U.S. was doomed and that China’s time to rise as a great power had arrived.¹⁶ Claiming a profound change unseen in a century, in which the East was on the rise and the West was in decline, Chinese leadership abandoned the low-profile foreign policy, presented the China Dream of National Rejuvenation, and proposed a new model of big power relations that required the U.S. to respect China’s uncompromising core national interests as the baseline for cooperation. Beijing no longer bends to America’s pressure or unilaterally accommodates its interests without conditions, reflecting China’s attitude toward the U.S. shifting from looking up (仰视) with a sense of inferiority to looking equally (平视), if not from a position of superiority. No one can ignore China’s core interests anymore.¹⁷

Many American politicians became worried that China was trying to replace the U.S.’s global supremacy and promote an authoritarian system to challenge liberal democracies. If “Who lost China?” was a U.S. preoccupation in the 1950s, many security strategists in the U.S. are now obsessed with “Who would lose to China?” As a result, in recent years, military strategists and policymakers have

¹⁵ Zhao, S. (2021, July 13). The US–China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World: Hostility, Alignment, and Power Balance. *Journal of Contemporary China*, (31)134.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670564.2021.1945733#abstract>

¹⁶ Zhao, S. (2024). Talk the Talk and Walk the Walk: Can Regular Communication Reverse the Prolonged Crisis in the US-China Relationship? *Journal of Contemporary China*, 33(150), 903-922

¹⁷ 阮宗泽 (Ruan Zongze). (2021). 中国平视世界的重大划时代意义 (the Profound Significance of China’s Looking at the World from equal position), 现代国际关系 (Contemporary International Relations), no. 6, 1.

shifted their focus from the “Global War on Terror” to what the Pentagon and U.S. officials call “Great Power Competition (GPC),” with the U.S.-China power competition at its center. The Trump administration’s National Security Strategy in 2017 stated that, “After being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned.” Senior administration officials thereby recast China as the U.S.’ top strategic competitor and framed the bilateral rivalry as a new Cold War. Matt Pottinger, the senior director for Asia and the Pacific at the National Security Council, unveiled that the administration’s China policy would “bring the concept of competition to the forefront.”¹⁸ Vice President Mike Pence accused previous administrations of having ignored or even “abetted” China’s abuses and proclaimed that the Trump administration would speak up, stand up, fight, and win.¹⁹ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo drew sharp distinctions between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese people, calling for resistance to the CCP’s global ambitions.²⁰

As the rivalry intensified, Beijing abandoned the low-profile foreign policy designed by former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping and provoked exactly the response Deng feared: many politicians in the U.S. were awakened to build American comprehensive national power, bolster its alliances and military partnerships in Europe and Asia, and impose sanctions on China’s tech companies.²¹ Beijing has risked alienating would-be valued partners and unifying rivals. The Chinese government has set strategic objectives beyond China’s ability and confronted the U.S. from a more isolated and stagnated position.²²

For its part, the U.S. government risks exaggerating Chinese threats to American values, economy, and politics, including China’s influence operations inside the U.S. In his 2025 book, Republican Senator Tom Cotton went so far as to not only declare that China was an evil empire that is preparing for military war and is waging an economic world war, but also that China has infiltrated American society and government and is coming for American kids.²³ The book ranked among the best-sellers on Amazon, reflecting the spread of a right-wing American politician’s exaggeration and anxiety about China’s threat.

¹⁸ Goldkorn, J. (2018, October 1). Trump official Matt Pottinger quotes Confucius, in Chinese, to make a point about language and truth. *The China Project*. <https://thechinaproject.com/2018/10/02/matt-pottinger-quotes-confucius-in-chinese/>

¹⁹ Perlez, J. (2018, October 5). Pence’s China Speech Seen as Portent of ‘New Cold War’. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/world/asia/pence-china-speech-cold-war.html>

²⁰ Pompeo, M. (2020, July 23). Communist China and the Free World’s Future. *The U.S. Department of State*. <https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>

²¹ Gates, R. (2023, September 29). The Dysfunctional Superpower: Can a Divided America deter China and Russia? *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/robert-gates-america-china-russia-dysfunctional-superpower>

²² Zhao, S. (2024, November). Talk the Talk and Walk the Walk: Can Regular Communication Reverse the Prolonged Crisis in the US-China Relationship? *Journal of Contemporary China*, 33(150). <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjcc20/33/150?nav=toCList>

²³ Cotton, T. (2025). *Seven Things You Can’t Say about China*. Premiere Collectibles.

Indeed, such racist viewpoints may play a role in the predominant view that China poses a threat to the U.S. As scholar D.G. Kim argues, racial considerations may still play an important role in the formation and expression of mass foreign policy attitudes toward China – an Asian power that has historically been viewed through an explicitly racial lens.²⁴

Unjust Targeting of Chinese American Scholars and Students

Exaggeration of China’s threat has not only serious geopolitical consequences for escalating the U.S.-China rivalry, but also internal repercussions for the rise of anti-Asian discrimination. According to a 2023 survey, nearly half of Americans believed that negative views of China contributed to anti-Asian attacks or incidents. Specifically, when asked about anti-Asian violence, 33% of Americans believed that a contributing factor was the view of China as an economic threat, while 47% believed a factor was the view of China as an espionage threat.²⁵

The “State of Chinese Americans” survey in 2024 by the Committee of 100 and National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago made a special effort to examine how poor U.S.-China relations had negatively impacted the public treatment of Chinese Americans. It found that:

- “89% [of the Chinese Americans surveyed] describe the current U.S. and China relationship as negative, and nearly two thirds (65%) said the current bilateral relations negatively affected how other Americans treat them.”
- “About two thirds (67%) think that legislative efforts by many states to limit the ability of individuals with Chinese citizenship to own various types of land has a negative effect on how others treat them”
- “61% said that the language and rhetoric used by U.S. news media when reporting on China and U.S.-China relations negatively affected how strangers treat them.”
- “About a quarter of the respondents said their relationships with acquaintances (26%) and coworkers (25%) were negatively impacted” by U.S.-China relations.²⁶

²⁴ D. G. Kim, “Anti-Asian Racism and the Racial Politics of China Great Power Rivalry,” Ph.D. dissertation, UC San Diego, 2022, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/94j226w2>

²⁵ Candid: Philanthropy News Digest. (2023, May 4). *STAATUS Index 2023: Attitudes towards Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders*. <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/features/research-briefs/staatus-index-2023-attitudes-towards-asian-americans-and-pacific-islanders>

²⁶ Committee of 100. (2025, September 25). *National Survey Data of Chinese Americans Shows Mental Health and Discrimination Continue to be Key Concerns*. <https://www.committee100.org/media-center/national-survey-data-of-chinese-americans-shows-mental-health-and-discrimination-continue-to-be-key-concerns/>

Chinese American scientists have particularly suffered. The U.S. government and universities had previously encouraged academic collaboration between American and Chinese scientists. As the tension between the two countries rose, the U.S. government began to decouple from China in science and technology. In this political environment, the U.S. government racially profiled and unfairly targeted Chinese American scientists as Chinese agents of science and technology espionage.

Temple University physics professor Xiaoxing Xi was among the first victims to be charged and prosecuted for sharing U.S. technology with China in 2015. An American citizen since 2004, Professor Xi described the scene when armed FBI agents raided his house before 7:00 am. “The armed agents in bullet-proof vests burst into my house, running about and yelling, ‘FBI! FBI!’ They pointed their guns at my wife and two daughters and ordered them to walk out of their bedrooms with their hands raised.” The government charged him with four counts of wire fraud for passing information about sensitive U.S. technology, for which he faced up to 80 years in prison and a \$1 million fine. But he was falsely charged. The government dropped the charges four months later. According to Professor Xi, his whole family is still living under constant worry that the government is reading their emails and listening to their phone calls, and anything they do could be the cause of trouble. According to Professor Xi, the fear is debilitating for him in the performance of his job, and it makes their life very stressful.²⁷

The Trump administration launched the “China Initiative” in 2018 to curb Chinese state-backed economic espionage. It is a fact that countries do spy on one another. Yet this China Initiative has racially profiled and targeted Chinese American scientists through investigations of minor administrative errors such as failing to disclose ties to China when applying for federal grants. The Initiative discriminated against Asian American academics and researchers, particularly those with ancestral or professional connections to China. Government agents accused Chinese American scientists at universities of allegedly failing to disclose ties to China, even though U.S. foreign disclosure requirements were unclear at the time.²⁸ Scientists who had previously been encouraged to develop global research engagements were now criminalized for those very engagements. The U.S. government agents weaponized grant disclosures to charge academics for allegedly failing to disclose their ties in China, accusing them of being “nontraditional collectors,” for China. But due to lack of proof, most cases ended in acquittal or dismissal.²⁹

²⁷ Xiaoxing Xi. (2024, May 14). Stop Racial Discrimination against Asian Americans. (停止对亚裔美国人的种族歧视), *Journal of Chinese Overseas*. https://brill.com/view/journals/jco/20/1/article-p50_7.xml

²⁸ Fink, Y. & Huang, Y. (2021, June 29). We are all Gang Chen. *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/06/29/1025711/we-are-all-gang-chen/>

²⁹ Tucker, E. (2022, February 23). US drops name of Trump’s ‘China Initiative’ after criticism. Associated Press. <https://apnews.com/article/business-china-asia-beijing-race-and-ethnicity-c0cb26411f08f82d2ceda30f399d7003>

Using racist language, Kiron Skinner, the Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. State Department, said in 2019 that China posed a particularly unique challenge as it represented “the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian.”³⁰ Not only is the quote racist, but also factually incorrect. Similar dynamics existed during the Cold War when Russophobia and anti-Soviet espionage prevailed in the U.S.

In 2020, the FBI director Christopher Wray called for a “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society” approach to fighting China’s “whole of society threat.”³¹ In the final days of the first Trump administration in January 2021, the government charged Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Professor Gang Chen with grant fraud and making false statements. Although Chen had been a U.S. citizen for over two decades, the U.S. Attorney claimed Chen’s loyalty was to China, reproducing the stereotype that casts Chinese Americans as inherently foreign and therefore not truly “American”. The government subsequently dropped charges a year later. After being vindicated, Chen reflected in February 2022, ‘We thought we had achieved the American Dream...until this nightmare happened.’³²

In another case under the first Trump administration, Professor Anming Hu of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, was accused of spying for China in September 2021. During the trial, U.S. law enforcement agents acknowledged that they used false information in order to conduct surveillance on Hu and his teenage son for two years. Hu was later found innocent by a court.³³

Three years after the China Initiative began to prosecute a group of ethnically Chinese scientists, 40 of the 148 individuals charged (just over 25%) pleaded or were found guilty, mostly over minor disclosure charges. Several high-profile cases were dropped.³⁴ In the process, the careers of many innocent Chinese American scientists were ruined. For example, during the year he was under investigation, Professor Gang Chen was banned from campus, and his contacts with students and postdocs were restricted. His productive MIT laboratory was dismantled. Although most of the accused, like Professor Chen, were exonerated, many had to borrow significant amounts of money to pay legal fees. Some lost their jobs. Survey data supports this grim picture. A survey by the Committee of 100 in October 2021

³⁰ Panda, A. (2019, May 20). A Civilization Clash Isn’t the Way to Frame US Competition with China. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/a-civilizational-clash-isnt-the-way-to-frame-competition-with-china/>

³¹ InDepthNews. (2020, March 9). CORVID 19- The Insatiable Urge to Bash China Surfaces Again! <https://indepthnews.net/corvid-19-the-insatiable-urge-to-bash-china-surfaces-again/>

³² Liang, A. (2023, January 30). America Against America: Anti-Chinese Racism in the Race for Talent. *The China Story*. <https://www.thechinastory.org/america-against-america-anti-chinese-racism-in-the-race-for-talent/>

³³ Liang, A. (2023, January 30).

³⁴ Barry, E. & Benner, K. (2022, January 20). U.S. Drops Its Case Against M.I.T. Scientist Accused of Hiding China Links. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/20/science/gang-chen-mit-china-initiative.html>

showed that 50.7 percent of ethnically Chinese scientists felt “considerable fear and/or anxiety that they are surveilled by the U.S. government.”³⁵

The Vice Chancellor for Research at the University of California, Berkeley, criticized these investigations as being ‘conducted in a manner that does not adhere to our American values.’³⁶ The heated anti-China rhetoric associated with the improper targeting of Chinese and Asian American scholars as national security threats has caused harm to Chinese American individuals and intensified anti-Asian discrimination.

The Biden administration suspended the China Initiative in February 2022. But irreparable damage had already been done to the Chinese American scientific community, with a chilling effect that lingers in American academia as its policy of presuming that Chinese scientists are guilty of spying for China continued. In September 2024, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives introduced a bill to revive the China Initiative during “China Week,” or what some called “China Bashing Week,”³⁷ in September 2024, when Congress passed 25 bills to combat alleged Chinese Communist Party threats.

While the number of prosecutions has slowed, intrusive and intimidating investigations have continued apace in the second Trump administration. According to one report, many Asian American scientists have complained that they continue to face negative scrutiny in U.S. government grant applications.³⁸ The threat of economic espionage from a multitude of foreign nations, including China, is a legitimate one. But until the U.S. government focuses its attention more carefully on investigating genuine threats instead of targeting Asian American researchers because of their national origin or ancestry, that threat will continue unchecked.³⁹

³⁵ Lee, J. Li, X., and staff. Racial Profiling Among Scientists of Chinese Descent and Consequences for the U.S. Scientific Community. <https://www.committee100.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/C100-Lee-Li-White-Paper-FINAL-FINAL-10.28.pdf>

³⁶ Liang, A. (2023, January 30).

³⁷ Lo, A. (2024, September 16). ‘China (bashing) week’ in the US is more spectacle than deterrent. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/china-opinion/article/3278608/china-bashing-week-us-more-spectacle-deterrent>

³⁸ Fischer, K. (2023, April 6). Can U.S. Research Recover from the China Initiative? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/can-u-s-research-recover-from-the-china-initiative?emailConfirmed=true&supportSignUp=true&supportForgotPassword=true&email=shahzad%40brennan.law.nyu.edu&success=true&code=success&bc_nonce=jezho9kvxk0rjahu47uv3&cid=gen_sign_in

³⁹ Brennan Center. (2023, June 21). *National Security & Profiling of Asian Americans*. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/national-security-profiling-asian-americans>

Lost Talent for the U.S. Economy

Through efforts like the China Initiative to target Chinese American scholars and students, the U.S. also risks losing the international talent competition with China. The U.S. has gained substantial economic benefits from foreign STEM talent. According to one study, in 2019, “the foreign-born STEM workforce contributed \$367 billion to \$409 billion in labor value-added, 1.7 to 1.9 percent of U.S. GDP. Foreign-born entrepreneurs have helped found U.S. companies in R&D-intensive industries; the value-added from these companies is estimated to range from \$260 billion to \$394 billion, or 1.2 to 1.8 percent of GDP. The primary economic costs to the United States from foreign STEM talent are misappropriation of trade secrets and the transfer of intangible technologies as foreign-born individuals who have worked or studied in the United States return to their home countries and use that knowledge to contribute to the development of new industries that compete with U.S. industries. On a net basis, foreign-born STEM workers are economically beneficial to the United States: net benefits range from \$200,000 to \$700,000 per individual over a three-year period on a net basis.”⁴⁰

Capitalizing on America’s problems in the race for talent and scientific advancement, Beijing has developed numerous programs to reverse the brain drain and attract talented scientists, particularly those of Chinese ethnicity, to strengthen China’s scientific capabilities. For this purpose, the Chinese government offered lucrative incentives to lure talent from abroad, including high salaries, research funding, and educational and housing perks. The most powerful tool for Beijing to attract talent was “the tumor of racism against Asians and Chinese.”⁴¹ A 2022 report by China’s State Council cited the China Initiative as an example of the “vile and absurd acts of the U.S. law enforcement” and evidence of the “harassment, monitoring, and crackdown” on Chinese scientists. Whether it is accurate or not, the report stated that the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype, or “being regarded as a ‘permanent alien’ is a painful experience shared by many Asian Americans,” and sends the message to ethnically Chinese people that the so-called ‘American Dream’ has become more of an American nightmare. As Xi Jinping continued to promote his “China Dream,” racial discrimination in America imperiled the ideal of opportunity for all, leading many Chinese scientists who were citizens of China to leave the U.S.⁴²

Three-quarters of the total respondents among over 1,200 scientists who responded to a *Nature* poll were considering leaving the U.S. The trend was particularly pronounced among early-career researchers. Of the 690 postgraduate researchers who responded, 548 considered leaving; 255 of 340 PhD students said

⁴⁰ Crane, K., Colvin, T., Goldman, A., Grumbling, E., Ware, A. (2021, October). Economic Benefits and Losses from Foreign STEM Talent in the United States. IDA. <https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/e/ec/economic-benefits-and-losses-from-foreign-stem-talent-in-the-united-states>

⁴¹ Global Times. (2023, December 18). Growing ‘Chinese exclusion’ sentiment risks turning US into an extremist country. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303866.shtml>

⁴² Liang, A. (2023, January 30).

the same. Although Europe and Canada were among the top choices for relocation, China was one destination.⁴³

“Souring U.S.-China relations, rising anti-China sentiments, and the concurrent, dramatic increase in anti-Asian hate crimes have inadvertently helped alleviate China’s brain drain — a longstanding issue the Chinese state has sought to address through talent recruitment programs,” writes the Brookings Institution.⁴⁴ The number of scientists of Chinese descent who left the U.S. for another country surged from 900 in 2010 to 2,621 in 2021, with an accelerated rate (75% higher) after 2018 when the China Initiative started.⁴⁵ Over 1,400 U.S.-trained Chinese scientists dropped their U.S. academic or corporate affiliation in favor of ones in China or elsewhere in 2021, which is an increase of 22% from the previous year.⁴⁶ Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang warned that the U.S. suffered an enormous loss when the brightest Chinese minds educated in U.S. institutions decided to return to China rather than build careers in America.⁴⁷

Targeting Chinese scholars and students also damages U.S. higher education, America’s top service export. According to *Bloomberg*, international students accounted for 5.9% of the total U.S. higher education population of almost 19 million in the 2023-2024 school year. More than 1.1 million foreign students came to the U.S., with India and China accounting for about half. In 2024, the U.S. “sold a net \$32 billion in services to China — including education, travel, and entertainment — more than double the amount in 2022 and accounting for 11% of the nearly \$300 billion global total. Almost a third of U.S. services exports to China were related to education, coming from tuition and living expenses for the Chinese students studying in the U.S.”⁴⁸ According to the U.S.-China Business Council’s Export Report

⁴³ Witze, A. (2025, March 27). 75% of US scientists who answered *Nature* poll consider leaving. *Nature*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00938-y>

⁴⁴ Ma, Y. (2023, November 16). How America lost the heart of China’s top talent. *Brookings Institution*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-america-lost-the-heart-of-chinas-top-talent/>; Yam, K. (2022, January 31). Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 339 percent nationwide last year, report says. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/anti-asian-hate-crimes-increased-339-percent-nationwide-last-year-repo-rcna14282>; Levin, B. & Perst, K. *Report to the Nation: 2020s – Dawn of a Decade of Rising Hate*. Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, California State University San Bernardino. <https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/2022-08/Report%20To%20The%20Nation8-4-22.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Quinn, R. (2023, July 5). Study: Chinese Scientists Increasingly Leaving U.S. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/research/2023/07/05/study-chinese-scientists-increasingly-leaving-us>

⁴⁶ Hua, S. & Hao, K. (2022, September 22). US-China Tensions Fuel Outflow of Chinese Scientist from US Universities. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-china-tensions-fuel-outflow-of-chinese-scientists-from-u-s-universities-11663866938>

⁴⁷ Siqui, J. (2025, July 16). Chinese brain drains ‘great loss’ for US, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang says. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3318364/chinese-brain-drain-great-loss-us-says-nvidia-ceo-jensen-huang>

⁴⁸ Bloomberg News. (2025, May 28). US to Revoke Chinese Student Visas in Escalating Crackdown. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-05-28/us-will-revoke-visas-of-chinese-students-escalating-crackdown>

2025, Chinese students contributed \$14.4 billion to the U.S. economy in 2024, supporting over 143,000 additional jobs in the country. Beyond the direct economic impact of their tuition dollars and spending, Chinese students educated in the U.S. represent a significant talent pool in critical fields, including artificial intelligence and quantum computing, which allows American companies to remain competitive in the global marketplace.⁴⁹

The number of Chinese students attending U.S. universities dropped by 25% between 2019 and 2023 (372,000 to 277,000). The decline came as more Chinese families began rethinking their higher education plans in light of worsening bilateral relations and growing concerns over safety abroad. The decline has brought uncertainty for higher education institutions in the United States. Chinese students bring with them coveted tuition dollars, a boon to the state's public universities, where international students pay a premium over the rate charged to residents. If Chinese students were to stop attending U.S. universities, their absence would be felt across academic disciplines. "More than a fifth of Chinese students in the U.S. studied math and computer science, roughly 17% pursued engineering, and almost 13% sought degrees in business and management."⁵⁰ The economic cost is real and mounting, but the deeper, more enduring cost is talent, the future of American innovation, and the country's standing in the world.⁵¹

In recognition of this, 104 Stanford University and 1,007 university faculty and researchers nationwide, including six Nobel Laureates, signed a letter to House Appropriations Committee leaders, cautioning against reinstatement of the discredited China Initiative through the Fiscal Year 2026 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill. The letter argues that a revival of the China Initiative, or a similar program, would harm America's global competitiveness, drive away top scientific talent, and undermine U.S. national interests.⁵²

⁴⁹ The US-China Business Council. (2025, April 29). *US Exports to China 2025*. <https://www.uschina.org/articles/us-exports-to-china-2025/>

⁵⁰ Dipierro, A. (2025, June 20). As White House wavers on visas, Chinese students at California colleges face uncertainty and worried parents. *EdSource*. <https://edsources.org/2025/us-china-student-visa-policy-changes/734859>

⁵¹ Ma, Y. (2025, May 1). Can studying in the US survive geopolitics? *Brookings Institution*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/can-studying-in-the-us-survive-geopolitics/>

⁵² Asian American Scholar Forum (AASF). (2025, July 23). *AASF Stands with Over 1000 University Faculty & 6 Nobel Laureates Cautioning on Harm of Revival of China Initiative to U.S. Competitiveness*. <https://www.aasforum.org/2025/07/23/aasf-stands-with-over-1000-university-faculty-6-nobel-laureates-cautioning-on-harm-of-revival-of-china-initiative-to-u-s-competitiveness/>

A Comeback of the “Chinese Exclusion Act”: Legal Exclusions from Land and Home Ownership

Anti-Chinese American racism has a long history in the U.S., dating back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Chinese workers began migrating to the U.S. in the 1850s and worked in gold mines, agriculture, and factories, helping build railroads in the American West. Chinese laborers often worked hard for whatever wages they could receive. Therefore, many of the non-Chinese workers came to resent the Chinese laborers for possibly squeezing them out of their jobs. Furthermore, as with most immigrant communities, many Chinese settled in their neighborhoods, and tales spread of Chinatowns as places where large numbers of Chinese men congregated to visit prostitutes, smoke opium, or gamble. As the number of Chinese laborers increased, so did the fear of the "yellow peril" and the strength of anti-Chinese sentiment. Some anti-Chinese advocates argued that Chinese immigrants lowered the cultural and moral standards of American society. Others used a more overtly racist argument for limiting immigration from East Asia, and expressed concern about the integrity of American racial composition. U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, signed by President Chester A. Arthur on May 6, 1882. This was the first significant law in U.S. history that broadly restricted immigration based on ethnicity.⁵³ As a result of growing anti-Chinese sentiment fueled by economic competition and racial prejudice, the Act specifically targeted Chinese laborers and blocked Chinese workers from entering the U.S., and banned Chinese immigrants already in the U.S. from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens.⁵⁴

Representing a dark and sordid chapter in U.S. immigration history, the rule of law, and human rights, the Chinese Exclusion Act was not repealed until 1943, when the U.S. was embroiled in the Second World War, and Roosevelt administration was interested in treating Chinese Americans well and ensuring the alliance with China against the Japanese Imperial Army.

Other Asian Americans have also historically been victims of racist policies, such as the incarceration of about 120,000 Japanese people in internment camps during the Second World War, one of the most atrocious violations of American civil rights in the 20th century. In the 1950s, the Cold War and the association of “Asia” with communism made life difficult for Asian Americans in the U.S. As Lily Zheng noted in a piece for the *Harvard Business Review*, “When the Vietnam War began in 1955, the decades-long conflict would only further enflame hostilities against Asians in the U.S. To the average, unaware American, and even to soldiers on the front lines in Vietnam, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans — even fellow American soldiers from these ethnicities — looked no different from ‘the enemy.’” At the same

⁵³ “Chinese Exclusion Act,” History, August 24, 2018, <https://www.history.com/articles/chinese-exclusion-act-1882>

⁵⁴ Office of the Historian. *Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts. Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations.* <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/chinese-immigration>

time, stereotypes evolved to also label Asian Americans as the “model minority,” delegitimizing the struggles of Black Americans. Many Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and other Asian immigrants and their descendants resisted this narrative to prevent history from repeating itself.⁵⁵

While the possibility of passing a contemporary version of the Chinese Exclusion Act is low, a growing trend of “Chinese exclusion” has taken place in U.S. society since the relationship with China has become militarized. Many politicians resorted to spreading hateful rhetoric and incorrect information about both Chinese Americans and China as a nation. They have blurred the distinction between the Chinese government, Chinese individuals, and Chinese Americans, creating the environment for dehumanization, stigmatization and racial attacks, vandalism, and consumer discrimination. During a 2024 Congressional hearing with Shou Zi Chew, CEO of TikTok, members of both political parties aired anti-Chinese sentiment, with much of it directed at Chew, and asked him if he was a Chinese Communist member, even though he had made it clear that he only had Singaporean citizenship.⁵⁶

The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act has resurfaced to some extent, as politicians in some states introduced legislation restricting or banning Chinese citizens and entities from purchasing land and real property. As of August 2025, 30 states—primarily controlled by Republicans—have passed 54 bills that restrict foreign property ownership. While four bills were passed into law before 2021, most legislative activity has taken place since 2021. In particular, 17 bills were passed into law in 2024, and 12 bills were passed into law in 2025.⁵⁷ This legislation restricted the Chinese purchases of land, buildings, and homes. For example, in May 2023, the state of Florida passed a law that bans many Chinese immigrants, including people lawfully in the U.S., from buying a home in large swaths of the state. A similar but less restrictive rule also applies to many immigrants from Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Syria. However, the law singles out people from China for especially draconian restrictions and harsher criminal penalties, including up to five years in prison for the person trying to buy a house and up to one year in jail for the seller, as well as thousands of dollars in fines.⁵⁸

The American Civil Liberties Union protested that “this law expands discrimination against people of Asian descent” and “is a relic from a long history of

⁵⁵ Zheng, L. (2021, May 27). To Dismantle Anti-Asian Racism, We Must Understand Its Roots. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2021/05/to-dismantle-anti-asian-racism-we-must-understand-its-roots>

⁵⁶ Soo, Z. (2024, February 2). Singaporeans bemoan Sen. Cotton's 'ignorant' grilling of TikTok CEO. *PBS News*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/singaporeans-bemoan-sen-cottons-ignorant-grilling-of-tiktok-ceo>

⁵⁷ Committee of 100. (2025, October 30). *Federal and State Bills Restricting Property Ownership by Foreign Entities*. <https://www.committee100.org/our-work/federal-and-state-bills-prohibiting-property-ownership-by-foreign-individuals-and-entities/>

⁵⁸ Qin, A. & Mazzei, P. (2024, May 6). When Buying a Home Is Treated as a National Security Threat. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/06/us/florida-land-law-chinese-homes.html>

similarly racist land laws in this country that were wrong then and are wrong now.”⁵⁹ These laws recall repeated efforts over the past century to weaponize claims of “national security” against Asian and other immigrants. In the early 20th century, politicians used similar justifications to pass “alien land laws” in more than a dozen states, prohibiting Chinese and Japanese immigrants from becoming landowners. Florida was one of the last states to repeal its alien land law in 2018, and since then, it has passed a multiple xenophobic laws that once again make it harder for Chinese immigrants to build a life in the state.⁶⁰

Although these measures are often framed as necessary to address national security concerns, particularly related to land near military bases or other sensitive locations, and the potential for Chinese entities to influence or control key sectors of the U.S. economy, the exclusion of an ethnic group from land ownership is a departure from the supposed American value of equal opportunity for all.

While U.S. lawmakers have increasingly suggested that, as China is a dangerous foreign adversary, Chinese purchases of agricultural land pose a national security threat, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Chinese nationals own less than 1% of all foreign-held land in the U.S.⁶¹

After the Texas legislature passed a bill to ban Chinese people from purchasing land in the state, advocacy group Asian Texans for Justice said it brought back “a shameful chapter in American history—when Asian immigrants were banned from owning land.”⁶²

These controversial laws have come with increasingly tense relations between the U.S. and China. Fears of the Chinese government spying in the U.S. reached a fever pitch after a Chinese balloon was discovered over Montana in February 2023. Although Beijing claimed it had blown off its course, floating across America, the U.S. sent top-of-the-line jet fighters to shoot it down. The debris of the balloon recovered by the U.S. Navy and analyzed at the FBI Laboratory revealed that the balloon's sensors had never been activated. Seven months later, General Mark Miley, retiring Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told CBS News that “there was

⁵⁹ American Civil Liberties Union. (2024, April 18). *Chinese Immigrants Urge Appeals Court to Block Florida's Discriminatory Housing Law: News Release*. <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/chinese-immigrants-urge-appeals-court-to-block-floridas-discriminatory-housing-law#:~:text=DEFEND%20THE%20RIGHTS%20OF%20ALL%20PEOPLE%20NATIONWIDE>

⁶⁰ American Civil Liberties Union. (2024, April 18).

⁶¹ Delouya, S. (2024, June 17). ‘They’re treating us like we’re spies’: Florida property ban has Chinese citizens fuming. *CNN Business*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/17/homes/florida-law-bans-chinese-citizens-buying-homes/index.html>

⁶² Plummer, K. (2025, June 9). US States Seek to Ban Chinese Citizens From Buying Land, Property. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/us-states-ban-chinese-citizens-buying-land-arizona-texas-2080869>

no intelligence collection by that balloon," which strayed from its path by winds at 60,000 feet. The Chinese spy balloon hysteria was largely baseless.⁶³

The return of Chinese exclusion from landownership has reinforced anti-Asian and anti-Chinese American sentiments. In 2023, Columbia University and the Committee of 100 conducted the "State of Chinese Americans" survey, which included nearly 6,500 participants in English, traditional Chinese, and simplified Chinese across the U.S., and showed the continued perception of racism against Chinese Americans. According to the survey, in the preceding 12 months:

- 74% Chinese Americans experienced racial discrimination;
- 55% worried about their safety relating to hate crimes or harassment;
- 9% were physically intimidated and/or assaulted, while 7% had their property vandalized;
- 46% reported being treated with less respect than other people at least a few times.⁶⁴

A Pew Survey in the same year confirmed that about nine in ten Asian Americans personally experienced at least one discrimination incident. Approximately a third of Asian adults (32%) said they knew a fellow Asian person in the U.S. who was threatened or attacked on racial or ethnic grounds. Meanwhile, 78% of Asian adults, even if they were born in the U.S., said they were treated as foreigners in some way. Experiences including being told to return to their home country or being treated as if they could not speak English.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Given the rising geopolitical tension between the U.S. and China, anti-Asian and particularly anti-Chinese American racism may continue to grow, with serious costs to American politics and society. From the specific measures on the state level to prohibit landownership, to the targeting and surveillance of Chinese scientists and indiscriminate hate crimes against Asians, it is alarming that the "Chinese exclusion" tendency is proliferating from the economic to the social level and from sporadic to more widespread incidents, affecting many Chinese Americans' lives.

⁶³ Martin, D. (2023, September 27). The Bizarre Secret behind China's spy balloon. *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-bizarre-secret-behind-chinas-spy-balloon/>

⁶⁴ Committee of 100. (2023, April 27). National Survey Data Shows Nearly 3 Out of Every 4 Chinese Americans Have Experienced Racial Discrimination In The Past 12 Months. <https://www.committee100.org/media-center/national-survey-data-shows-nearly-3-out-of-every-4-chinese-americans-have-experienced-racial-discrimination-in-the-past-12-months/>

⁶⁵ Ruiz, N. Im, C. & Tian, Z. (2023, November 30). Discrimination Experiences Shape Most Asian Americans' Lives. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2023/11/30/discrimination-experiences-shape-most-asian-americans-lives/>

This development has alerted and mobilized Asian and, particularly, Chinese American communities to defend their rights. Many Chinese American civil rights organizations, such as the 80-20 Initiative (Asian American Education Foundation), The Committee of 100, and United Chinese Americans, have organized protests and compared the China Initiative and ethnically motivated local legislation and executive orders to the racist Chinese Exclusion Act and called them unconstitutional. They have also tried to educate their communities on how to engage more in the political process, monitor Congress, educate Members of Congress and elected officials, and advocate for legislation to protect their interests.

Whenever China is painted as the “enemy,” Chinese Americans are treated with suspicion, profiled, scapegoated, and/or excluded. And the consequences are real—from discrimination in schools and workplaces to violence on the streets. This should not be accepted as a normal development. While a constructive and healthier U.S.–China relationship is essential for the well-being of both countries and for the safety and rights of Chinese and Asian Americans, American citizens of all ethnicities should be able to live free of racism and discrimination, regardless of the U.S. relationship with any other country.