

Artificial intelligence

Microsoft to move top AI experts from China to new lab in Canada

Beijing-based researchers apply for visas to move to Vancouver amid geopolitical tensions



Microsoft said: 'We are establishing a new lab in Vancouver that will be organisationally aligned with [Microsoft Research Asia] and designed to better engage with the engineering teams in Vancouver' © Tingshu Wang/Reuters

Eleanor Olcott in Hong Kong, **Qianer Liu** in London and **Ryan McMorro** in Beijing 3 HOURS AGO

Microsoft is moving some of its best artificial intelligence researchers from China to Canada in a move that threatens to gut an essential training ground for the Asian country's tech talent.

The Beijing-based Microsoft Research Asia (MSRA) has begun seeking visas to move top AI experts from China's capital to its institute in Vancouver, said four people with knowledge of the plans.

These people said the move could affect 20 to 40 staff. A person close to Microsoft said fewer Chinese staff will move to Canada this year, where the US tech giant is creating a new lab staffed by experts from around the world.

Researchers described the move as the so-called "Vancouver Plan." Those with knowledge of the decision described it as a response to heightened political tensions between the US and China, as well as a defensive manoeuvre to stop top talent from being poached by domestic tech groups desperate for AI researchers to develop domestic versions of OpenAI's ChatGPT.

After this article was first published, Microsoft said: "the number reported is not accurate. There is no 'so-called Vancouver Plan.'"

The company said on Friday that: "We are establishing a new lab in Vancouver that will be organisationally aligned with MSRA and designed to better engage with the engineering teams in Vancouver. The lab will be staffed with people from other MSR labs around the world, to include China."

Two MSRA researchers said they had received recent job offers from Chinese internet companies, but have turned down the approaches and are applying for visas to move to Canada instead.

“Even though [Microsoft](#) has deep links with China, there is a risk in having our best researchers here, especially ones working in machine learning,” said one of the researchers. “There is a risk of talent being poached by Chinese companies or employees being harassed by authorities. We have discussed these risks in internal meetings.”

A second Microsoft researcher also applying for a Canadian visa said: “Maybe in a third country, outside of the US and China, we can regain the vibrant tech discussion from the old days.”

Any decision to relocate top AI researchers risks sparking ire in Beijing, which has sought to lure high-tech Chinese researchers working overseas back to the mainland through generous grants and prestigious teaching posts.

Founded by Taiwanese computer scientist Lee Kai-Fu, MSRA has been an important training centre for Chinese tech talent. Its star-studded alumni list includes Alibaba chief technology officer Wang Jian, SenseTime chief Xu Li, and Yin Qi, head of the AI group Megvii.

“MSRA’s contribution to [AI](#) has been phenomenal,” said one tech consultant in China who has previously worked with Microsoft. “It has been working in the field for a long time. Many ex-colleagues have joined Chinese tech companies and boosted the overall AI ecosystem in China.”

Microsoft has been in China for more than three decades. It has retained a strong presence in the country, even as other Western tech groups, including Google, eBay, Facebook and Uber, have been forced out by competition or regulation.

Microsoft has developed popular localised products, including its flagship Office and Windows software packages and Bing search engine.

According to a company WeChat post in September, Microsoft had 9,000 employees in China, more than 80 per cent of which are software engineers or worked in research and development. The same post announced plans to hire 1,000 more staff in the country.

But a large portion of the engineering talent in China work on global products, which could be increasingly problematic for the US company if ties between Beijing and Washington fray further. One person close to the company said it was possible some of these talented engineers could also be moved out of China in the future.

LinkedIn, the Microsoft-owned group, laid off staff in its China office in May after [announcing](#) it was shutting down InCareer, the pared-back job application site for Chinese users that had replaced the professional social networking site in 2021.

MSRA stood out as a rare example of collaboration between China and the US on high-tech research. But two researchers said deteriorating relations between the two powers and increased

paranoia about their respective tech ambitions had narrowed their ability to collaborate with colleagues in the west and put them under greater scrutiny from officials in China.

The institute was criticised by Washington after the Financial Times [reported](#) that it worked with a Chinese military-run university on AI research that could be used for surveillance and censorship.

“AI has become a so-called sensitive field over the past two years,” said one of the Chinese Microsoft researchers applying for a Canadian visa. “Previously, being a Chinese national working in an American institution meant having access to great resources from both countries. The space for communication is narrowing.”

Additional reporting by Richard Waters in San Francisco

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.
