University Clears Chinese Biophysicist of Misconduct

The leader of a team hailed for the discovery of an antibiotic peptide has been absolved of wrongdoing by his employer. At a press conference last week, Sichuan University in Chengdu, China, announced that allegations of “scientific fabrication” against Qiu Xiao-Qing are unfounded, according to an investigation by a university expert group.

The controversy is unlikely to die down soon, however. The company whose staff leveled the charges has blasted the investigation as lacking “objectivity, fairness, and transparency” and has called on the Chinese government to mount its own inquiry. As Science went to press, it was unclear how the government would respond.

In 2003, Qiu, a biophysicist at Sichuan University’s West China Hospital, along with 17 co-authors described in *Nature Biotechnology* an engineered peptide with specific antibacterial properties. Chinese media touted the protein, “pheromonicin,” or “Ph-SA,” as a major breakthrough in antibiotics.

Before publication, Qiu applied for a Chinese patent on the peptide and the process of making it. Sichuan NTC Holdings Limited agreed to pay West China Hospital a $250,000 licensing fee; it paid half up front and set up a subsidiary, Chengdu Yanghui Biotechnology, to make pheromonicin. After 2 years of failed attempts at production, Sichuan NTC started to question the patent’s validity and refused to pay the second half of the licensing fee. A dispute broke out between Sichuan NTC and West China Hospital, escalating into a fraud allegation. Six of the authors of the 2003 paper wrote to *Nature Biotechnology* last December, alleging that pheromonicin was not “targeted … against specific bacteria” and asking that their names be withdrawn from the paper. Qiu has denied the charge and sued two critics for defamation (*Science*, 17 February, p. 937).

After Sichuan University’s news conference, Qiu told *Science* that the names of the six authors-cum-critics were added to the paper when they performed experiments in part to answer questions from *Nature Biotechnology* reviewers. Four authors are Sichuan NTC employees who had been assigned to Qiu’s lab to produce pheromonicin for animal safety studies. The other two, of the National Sichuan Institute of Antibiotic Industry, carried out analyses of pheromonicin’s antibacterial properties.

In response to the misconduct charge, Sichuan University assembled a panel of experts in microbiology, biochemistry, and molecular biology to conduct experiments to determine whether “the ‘falsification’ charge … could be substantiated.” After 3 months of work, they found “no factual evidence” for falsification, according to a press release. University officials declined to name the panel members or comment further.

Sichuan NTC is not impressed. In a statement, the company called on Sichuan University to release the full investigation report; it says it will refuse to recognize the panel’s findings “without a review by government authorities.” But it’s not clear what agency would handle such an appeal. “China should set up an official mechanism and rules to deal with allegations of academic misconduct,” says Yi Rao, a neurobiologist at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago, Illinois.

A separate inquiry has cleared the second corresponding author on the *Nature Biotechnology* paper, George Wu of the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington. Spokesperson James Walter says the Health Center’s Committee on Research Misconduct found “no credible evidence” to support a misconduct allegation, and therefore “no investigation was conducted.” *Nature Biotechnology* is also reviewing the case and will make a decision after Sichuan University relays the investigation results to the journal.

Sichuan University says it will sue those responsible for “irretrievable damage” to its reputation. Qiu, for his part, says the affair has made him loath to get involved in the business end of science: “My place is in the lab.”

---HAO XIN

Vindicated. Fraud allegations against Qiu Xiao-Qing are unfounded, a Sichuan University panel says.

---ELI KINTISCH

Linear Collider Gains Friends

What do an economist, a biologist, and a science policy expert have in common? As members of a recent National Research Council (NRC) committee on particle physics, they all think the United States should spend between $300 million and $500 million total over the next 5 years laying the groundwork for the proposed International Linear Collider (ILC) with the goal of hosting the multibillion-dollar machine. Five years ago, U.S. particle physicists designated the ILC as their future priority, and this week the NRC panel, drawn from various fields, endorsed that vision in a report requested by the Department of Energy (DOE) and the National Science Foundation.

“Not only is the science very exciting, but also if you think in terms of strengthening the physical sciences, then particle physics is an important part of that,” says committee chair Harold Shapiro, an economist at Princeton University. Melvyn Shochet, a physicist at the University of Chicago and chair of DOE’s High Energy Physics Advisory Panel, says, “I think this report will have legs in Washington more than a report written by particle physicists.”

---ADRIAN CHO

Changes in Los Alamos Pensions Trigger Suit

Three unions representing nearly 500 of the roughly 9500 employees of Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico have asked a California state judge to order the weapons lab’s new managers to change the pension plan before it goes into effect this summer. The current situation “endangers national security” by pushing out experienced scientists, say the unions.

On 1 June, the new management team, which includes Bechtel and the University of California (UC), will institute a new retirement system that does not include a cash payout and could even force retirees to abandon their UC plans for an as-yet-unannounced retirement fund. UC “threatened and coerced” scientists to accept the changes by tying them to continued employment, according to the suit, which was filed last week.

Arthur Krantz, an attorney for the unions, said the goal is to force UC, which now manages the lab, to make changes in the pension plan before a 15 May deadline for employees to choose among several benefit plans. Last month, DOE’s National Nuclear Security Administration said the new benefits were “substantially equivalent,” and a lab spokesperson called them fair.

---ELI KINTISCH
Tremaine says Brunini’s results provide “active support for the idea that substantial migration has indeed occurred.” Theoretical astronomer Jack Lissauer of NASA’s Ames Research Center in Moffett Field, California, says he is surprised by the very narrow range of resulting obliquity values in Brunini’s computer runs: “It’s very interesting to see how precisely his results agree with the actual values.”

**OCEANOGRAPHY**

**Korea and Japan Clash Over Surveys**

**TOKYO—**A little-known international agency that approves the names of sea-floor topographic features found itself caught in the middle of a high-stakes territorial spat last week between Japan and South Korea. The two countries have backed away from a confrontation over dueling surveys in disputed waters, at least for the moment. But the fate of survey data—and of the coveted territory itself—still hangs in the balance.

The dispute centers on a cluster of islets, and the surrounding exclusive economic zone (EEZ), roughly halfway between South Korea and Japan. The islets are claimed by both countries. South Korea calls the outcroppings Dokdo and the body of water the East Sea. To Japan, they are Takeshima and the Sea of Japan. South Korea controls the islets thanks to a police garrison on one of the rocks. The nations are vying for rights to exploit fishing grounds and extract what may be substantial offshore deposits of methane hydrates.

Partly because of the contretemps, the sea floor near the islets had not been surveyed since a Japanese-led effort in the 1970s—that is, until a South Korean expedition last year. South Korea’s hydrographic survey “found many new [subsea] features,” including seamounts and troughs, says Seok-Chang Kwon, head of the Marine Research and Development Division of South Korea’s Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. “It’s our right to name the features we found,” he says. The ministry was planning to propose Korean names for consideration at a 21 June meeting of the Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names of the General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans, an organization that standardizes and publishes nautical information under the auspices of the Monaco-based International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) and UNESCO’s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. Naming a feature is “in general, first-come, first-served,” as long as there are good supporting survey data, says subcommittee chair Hans-Werner Schenke, a marine geologist at the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research in Bremerhaven, Germany.

Officials in South Korea and Japan agree that the names of subsea features and the EEZ boundaries are separate issues. Nonetheless, both sides view the name game as giving weight to competing claims. After learning of South Korea’s plans to propose names to IHO, Japan last week had dispatched two Coast Guard research vessels to gather data to support Japanese names. South Korea responded by sending 20 gunboats to patrol the disputed waters. Two days of tense negotiations yielded a compromise: Japan canceled its survey, and South Korea pledged to postpone proposing names. And the countries agreed to resume stalled talks on the EEZ boundaries.

No matter the outcome, “the committee encourages the exchange of new survey data,” says member Lisa Taylor, a geophysicist with the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Boulder, Colorado. (Korea’s National Oceanographic Research Institute has posted survey data on its Web site.) The information is useful not only for navigation, Taylor says, but increasingly for geographical, geological, and paleontological research as well.

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**NYU Gift Kicks Up More Dust**

A prominent Harvard archaeologist is rallying support for working with unprovenanced artifacts, following a controversy surrounding the recent $200 million gift to New York University (NYU) from the Leon Levy Foundation (Science, 31 March, p. 1846). Lawrence Stager, whose excavations at Ashkelon, Israel, are funded by the foundation, argues in a “Statement of Concern” that “unprovenanced” artifacts should be the legitimate object of study. More than 100 archaeologists and historians have signed the statement (www.bibarch.org/bswbu0Unprovenanced.html).

The 11-point statement criticizes the policies of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) and other organizations that prohibit the first publication of unprovenanced antiquities in their journals as well as presentations of such objects at their meetings. “The antiquities market is often the means by which [unprovenanced objects] are rescued,” the statement says, citing the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel of Judas as examples.

AIA President Jane Waldbaum says the statement mischaracterizes the organization’s policies. “At no time was any attempt made to … prevent the scholarly discussion of archaeological objects,” Waldbaum writes on the association’s Web site. The goal is to avoid promoting artifacts with questionable provenance.

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**Scripps Florida Deal in Jeopardy**

It’s down to the wire again for Scripps Florida, the East Coast offshoot of the La Jolla, California–based research behemoth. A 2 May deadline looms to resolve an impasse with Palm Beach County officials over the opening of a Scripps branch in Jupiter. At issue: jobs. Scripps officials hope to create 545 jobs in return for $369 million from Florida and about $200 million from the county. County officials say the institute should be liable if it fails to produce the promised number of jobs or leaves before the 30-year deal is up.

This week, County Commissioner Burt Aaronson offered Scripps a compromise: Take out a $100 million bond, and the county will knock 15 years off the deal. But Scripps officials balked at the expense, saying the bond would require collateral and cost about $23 million in premiums. “We’ve said all along [the deal] can’t put any of our assets in La Jolla at risk,” says Scripps spokesperson Keith McKeown.

But don’t count the deal out just yet. Scripps officials badly want to open a new Florida facility next year. And that would be hard to pull off at another site if the current deal falls through.