

## Google opens AI centre in China as competition heats up (Update)

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Google announced Wednesday that it will open a new artificial intelligence research centre in Beijing, tapping China's talent pool in the promising technology despite the US search giant's exclusion from the country's internet.

Artificial intelligence, especially machine learning, has been an area of intense focus for American tech stalwarts Google, Microsoft and Facebook, and their Chinese competitors Alibaba, Tencent and Baidu as they bid to master what many consider the future of computing.

AI research has the potential to boost developments in self-driving cars and automated factories, translation products and facial recognition software, among other innovations.

Google's move to open a Beijing office focused on fundamental research is an indication of China's AI talent, widely seen as being neck-and-neck with the United States in research capability.

"Chinese authors contributed 43 percent of all content in the top 100 AI journals in 2015," Li Feifei, a researcher leading the new centre, wrote in a blog post on Google's website.

"We've already hired some top experts, and will be working to build the team in the months ahead."

Li noted that Chinese engineers formed the backbones of the winning

teams in the past three ImageNet Challenges, an international AI competition to test which computing technology is better at recognising and categorising pictures.

Chinese search engine Baidu's team was banned for a year for breaking the rules during the 2015 competition.

The country's large population and strong mathematics and sciences education has nurtured a slew of engineering talent.

Many land in Beijing's burgeoning AI tech startup scene, supported by universities and government-affiliated institutes.

## **Young talent**

It is not hard to find AI talent in China, said Yuan Jirui of SeetaTech, one of the start-up's core team of founders from the Institute of Computer Technology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

"There's a trend of AI talent in China being quite young," she said. "AI education is expanding to high schools and middle schools."

SeetaTech uses deep learning to solve problems like detecting defects in factory products and finding faces in a crowd for public security organs.

"Data fuels our AI engine," Yuan said.

AI companies in China suck up personal data from the massive population and use it to train machine-learning algorithms—but Google, locked out of the internet, has little user data to pull from in the country.

For now it is focusing on making use of Chinese talent. Roughly half of its 600 employees in China are engineers working on global products,

said company spokesman Taj Meadows.

Its job board in China shows about a dozen openings in the AI field. The China centre will join Google's other research facilities outside of its Silicon Valley hub, including in New York, Toronto, London and Zurich.

Google's search engine and many of its services are blocked by China's Great Firewall, but internet regulators have recently allowed access to its translation product, one that has made leaps and bounds in accuracy by incorporating the company's AI research.

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