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From the April 1, 2005 print edition

No Small Feat

Prof grows in stature with nanotech patents

[Justin Rubner](#)
Staff Writer

Growing up during the Cultural Revolution was anything but a positive cultural experience for Georgia Tech physics professor Z.L. Wang and many other Chinese.



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The movement, started in 1966 by then Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, lasted for 10 bloody years and attempted to purge the society of intellectuals as well as close down and propagandize much of the education system.

The revolution didn't manage to dampen the intellectual curiosity of Wang, though, who has gone on to become one of the world's foremost experts in nanotechnology.

Wang, 44, was awarded his second nanotechnology-related patent in March. In five years, Wang says, it might lead to an early cancer detection system, and in 20 years to "nanobots," theoretical atomic-sized particles that could travel the blood stream hunting down



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His March patent deals with the manufacturing of "nanobelts," which he discovered in 2001. Nanobelts are chemically pure, structurally uniform, ribbon-like particles widely believed to be superior to the current crop of nanostructures like nanotubes and nanowires.

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The patent comes as Georgia Tech is planning to build an \$81 million nanotechnology center on campus, which many hope will thrust the state into the nanotechnology elite.

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Nanotechnology is the study and manipulation of matter at nanoscale -- about 100,000th the width of a human hair. It's a promising science because objects at nanoscale often have dramatically different properties than normal objects, which makes it possible to manufacture goods such as clothes and electronics that also perform differently.

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In addition to cancer detection, nanobelts are expected someday to be used in ultra-sensitive gas sensors and in flat-panel displays.

"The commercial applications of his research will be recognized in the long term," said Arnall Golden Gregory LLP attorney Jeff Stewart, who also is president of the Georgia Nanotechnology Alliance. "The level of research he is doing is among the top in the world. His discovery of nanobelts is considered in the same category as the discovery of nanotubes, which are now finding commercial applications in electronics and many other industries."

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But with such a young science, discoveries are often made before a purpose is known. "It's a solution looking for a problem," Stewart said.

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Although Wang's high school had no textbooks during his last two years there, he and his family managed to buy math and physics books on his father's \$20-a-month salary as a wine maker. His mother worked on a commune, growing the food on which his family survived.

"That was all the money we got," said Wang. "We used that for our food, for my books. My parents, they didn't even have an elementary school education. But they supported me to whatever height I could reach."

Under such a repressive system as the Cultural Revolution, he said, innovation and science were not a priority. Nonetheless, he found his passion early on in life.

"I was dreaming at that time of physics," Wang said. "But I didn't see the future. Why? Because there was no education system. My best future at that time was to succeed what my father was doing ... or to work at a farm."

But timing would play a crucial role in Wang's success in life. He graduated from high school in 1977, shortly after Mao died. Luckily for Wang, the Cultural

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Revolution died with him.

Shortly after, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, reinstated the college system. Wang would become one of the first students to go to college in China in the post-Cultural Revolution era, as well as go to college in the United States in 1983. Other than a short stint at Cambridge University in England, he has been in the United States ever since.

"The true revolution that occurred was when Deng Xiaoping came in charge," he said.

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