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Following a long period of research in the University of Oxford, he returned to China as a Professor of Structural Biology in Tsinghua University. From March 2003 to April 2007, he served as Director-general of the Institute of Biophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, and Director of the National Laboratory of Biomacromolecules.

He was awarded the “Chen Jiageng Science Prize” for his work on the structure of mitochondrial respiratory membrane protein Complex II, and the “Trieste Science Prize” for his SARS research.

Zihe Rao was elected as a Member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 2003 and a Member of the Third World Academy of Sciences in 2004.