

US steps up witch hunt against Chinese scientists

By Shuvu Batta
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The US federal government has arrested researchers and scientists of Chinese descent as part of an accelerated crackdown on alleged participants of China's "Thousand Talents" program. The program was created in 2008 by the Chinese Central government to recruit leading international experts in scientific research by offering research opportunities and financial incentives.

The attack on scientists follows the Trump administration's suspension of immigration into the United States via executive order. Trump claimed the action was necessary to "help to conserve vital medical resources for American citizens," and will "help put unemployed Americans first in line for jobs as we reopen." The country with the most billionaires in the world, despite having 4 percent of the world's population, has 29 percent of the world's deaths from COVID-19. Seeking to deflect from its colossal failure in handling the pandemic, the Trump administration, representative of the financial oligarchy, is blaming economic hardship on immigrants, going so far as to imply that they are not worthy of medical care.

This nationalist campaign of the financial oligarchy, which aims to divide the international working class, extends especially to Chinese workers, who are being blamed for "stealing" national trade secrets. On February, FBI Director Christopher Wray said at the Department of Justice China Initiative Conference, "China is threatening the U.S. economy—and national security—with its relentless efforts to steal sensitive technology and proprietary information from U.S. companies, academic institutions, and other organizations... They've shown that they're willing to steal their way up the economic ladder at our expense," adding that "The Department of Justice and the FBI are going to hold people accountable for that and protect our nation's innovation and ideas."

On May 13, Qing Wang, a former Cleveland Clinic doctor was arrested. The next day, he appeared in court on charges of wire fraud and falsifying his personal information to obtain millions in federal grant funding.

In a released statement, Eric Smith, the FBI agent in charge of the investigation alleges that "Wang knowingly withheld information that he was employed and served as Dean of the College of Life Sciences and Technology at the Huazhong University of Science and Technology."

The arrest is not a unique case. On May 11, Simon Saw-Teo Ang, a professor specialized in electrical engineering and former

NASA researcher at the University of Arkansas pled guilty on charges of wire fraud. Three days earlier, Dr. Xiao-Jiang Li, former molecular biology professor at Emory University, pled guilty on charges of filing a false tax return.

Arrests related to the program started in January, when Charles Lieber, a pioneer in nanoscience and former Harvard Chemistry Department Chairman, was arrested on charges of making false statements about his involvement with the Thousand Talents program. Lieber was subsequently able to purchase freedom through the payment of his \$1,000,000 bond.

Professor Frank Wu, at the University of California Hastings College of the Law, has kept close track of Chinese Espionage cases. In an interview with *NPR*, Wu said of the case against Lieber, "Up until a few years ago, universities were urging their researchers to collaborate with China. If there was a funding issue, a researcher might face disciplinary action, but you wouldn't face being fired and going to prison and having your name dragged through the mud as a spy.

"This is a big, big case. This is a case that's all about U.S.-China relations. It's about competition. It's about how science should be done."

The professors were being targeted under the "China Initiative", a broad program created in November 2018 by former Attorney General Jeff Sessions and led by the Department of Justice's National Security Division. Upon its creation, Sessions stated, "Chinese economic espionage against the United States has been increasing—and it has been increasing rapidly. Enough is enough. We're not going to take it anymore. I have ordered the creation of a China Initiative led by Assistant Attorney General John Demers and composed of a senior FBI Executive, five United States Attorneys ... and several other Department of Justice leaders and officials."

A year after the creation of the initiative, the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, released a bipartisan report, with the conclusion that foreign countries "seek to exploit America's openness to advance their own national interests" and that "the most aggressive of them has been China." It especially cited the Thousand Talents Program, claiming that China used the program to exploit access to US research labs and institutions. The FBI deemed the program to be a form of "non-traditional espionage."

Since the initiative's creation, dozens of people, including professors, cancer researchers, engineers, and businessmen have been indicted and jailed. In conjunction to this crackdown, several

departments of the US executive branch have moved to sanction groups and individuals with ties to its geopolitical rivals.

According to China Initiative leader John Demers “Among the 6000 Chinese scientists who have received grants from the National Institute of Health, around 180 are currently under investigation for violation of intellectual property law.”

The US Department of Education is currently investigating nine campuses for violating Section 117 of the Higher Education Act. This obscure provision requires colleges to report all gifts and contracts from foreign sources that exceed \$250,000. It was put in place in 1965 but remained unenforced till 2019 and 2020.

In letters to Harvard and Yale on February 11, the department wrote that it was investigating whether the two Ivy League universities had failed to report \$375 million from countries including China, Iran, Russia, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The letters specifically requested all records of gifts and contracts from two Chinese telecommunications firms, Huawei and ZTE; the Russian security firm Kaspersky Lab; and national research funds, The Skolkovo Foundation of Russia, The Alavi Foundation of Iran, The Qatar National Research Fund, and the Thousand Talents Program of China.

The China Initiative is not an aberration, but a continuation of a decades-long pressure campaign by the US ruling class in its drive for global domination.

From 2001 to 2011, the Justice Department secured over 100 convictions in cases involving trade secret thefts and six convictions in economic espionage cases. In 2011, a federal court in Indiana sentenced a scientist to seven years in prison on charges of “economic espionage” on behalf of a foreign university tied to the Chinese government.

Under the Obama administration, Attorney General Eric Holder established an internal Task Force on Intellectual Property in 2010 and in 2013 advanced a strategy of increased surveillance and prosecution for cases of “trade theft,” which sharply escalated the activity of the FBI and other government departments, ultimately leading to a rise in arrests of professors and scientists.

Among those arrested was Professor Xi Xiaoxing, a US citizen and chair of the Physics department at Temple University. FBI agents broke into his home and arrested him for charges of sharing sensitive technology with collaborators in China. He never did, and furthermore the findings of his research were public from the very beginning. The FBI had to drop its charges. The professor lost his job, his title, and was prohibited from entering the campus or speaking with students. Similar experiences were shared by Professor Sherry Cheng, a government hydrologist in Ohio, and two former Eli Lilly scientists.

The bipartisan drive of the United States to criminalize individuals of Chinese descent is part of an international phenomenon caused by the push of all imperialist powers towards world war.

Trump has labelled COVID-19 as “the Chinese virus,” calling it an “attack” by China and the “worst attack” in US history. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has advanced the “big lie” that the virus originated in a Wuhan Lab, despite scientific proof that the origins were zoonotic transfer—transfer from animal to humans. This claim has been repeated by state-sponsored far-right

politicians and groups internationally.

The lies of governments and politicians around the world has provided the fuel necessary for an international upsurge of anti-Asian violence. According to Human Rights Watch: “In the UK, Asian people have been punched in the face and taunted, accused of spreading coronavirus. Two women attacked Chinese students in Australia, punching and kicking one and yelling ‘Go back to China’ and ‘you f***ng immigrants.’ Two men attacked a Chinese-American in Spain and beat him so badly that he was in a coma for two days. A man with a knife attacked a Burmese family in Texas.” Recently, in New York, a Chinese woman was attacked in the subways.

The arrests of scientists by the sudden enforcement of decades-long unenforced laws, with charges of “economic espionage” is an extension of the Trump administration’s trade war measures against China, which is threatening to transform more and more into a “hot war” between two nuclear-armed powers. After the deaths of more than 90 thousand Americans and infection of at least 1.5 million and the economic devastation and ruin of tens of millions caused by decades of wage cuts, rise of debts, and the decimation of public services, the US ruling class is seeking to manipulate and divert internal social tensions outwards. It seeks to accomplish this by labeling workers of Chinese descent as spies and agents of the Chinese state.

Researchers of Chinese descent make up nearly half the workforce in American Research Laboratories; they are in great part responsible for the immense medical and technological leaps that humanity has been able to achieve in the past few decades. Yet the capitalist system, which has divided the world into rival nation-states and workers into rival racial and ethnic groups, acts as a powerful restraint to scientific progress.

Last year the Justice Department filed a lawsuit against a Chinese couple that worked for 10 years in an Ohio lab researching pediatric diseases, including childhood cancers. The US government has recently accused China of attempting to “steal” research for the COVID-19 vaccine as governments around the world race independently to produce it, in a bid to drive up profits for their pharmaceutical companies. As scientists call for international collaboration and a globally coordinated response to the virus, to save the lives of millions around the world, the capitalist class, including the rulers of the Chinese state, is doing the exact opposite.

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