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FBI Director's Shock Claim: Chinese Students Are a Potential Threat

Asian American advocates were outraged by Chris Wray's call. 'We cannot have every Chinese student or scientist assumed guilty until proven innocent,' one told The Daily Beast.

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Asian American advocacy groups are blasting [FBI Director Chris Wray](#) for telling Congress that Chinese students in the United States may be covertly gathering intelligence for their government back home.

Wray's comments came during the Senate intelligence committee's annual open hearing on the greatest threats to the country. A host of Intelligence Community leaders shared a litany of concerns about dangers from around the globe. Then [Sen. Marco Rubio](#), a Florida Republican, asked Wray about "the counterintelligence risk posed to U.S. national security from Chinese students, particularly those in advanced programs in science and mathematics."

Wray took it from there.

"The use of non-traditional collectors, especially in the academic setting—whether it's professors, scientists, students—we see in almost every field office that the FBI has around the country," he said. "It's not just in major cities. It's in small ones as well, it's across basically every discipline. And I think the level of naivete on the part of the academic sector about this creates its own issues."

What's more, Wray added, the Bureau is actively investigating some Chinese government-backed groups that facilitate dialogues between Chinese and American academics. **It was a rare revelation of active [FBI investigations](#)**—one

that drew pointed criticism from Asian-American advocacy and student groups.

[OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates](#), a group that works on issues related to Asian American and Pacific Islanders, said in a statement that they found Wray's comments "dishonest and insulting."

"It is dangerous and irresponsible for him to accuse many individuals seeking a higher education, or to contribute to their field of study, of spying," the statement said.

"His remarks only further insinuate that Chinese and Chinese Americans continue to be treated racially profiled as perpetual foreigners in the intelligence community," the statement continued.

And Jason Li, who heads Stanford's Asian American Students Association, also criticized the comments.

"We strongly denounce Director Wray's comments, which fall in line with a long history of targeting, vilifying, and scapegoating immigrants under the cloak of national security," he said in a statement. "International students are our friends, our colleagues, and our family...This overreach of national security harms our communities, and we condemn Wray's statements in our fight against racial profiling and discrimination."

The FBI declined to comment on a request for additional details about Wray's comments. A spokesperson for Rubio did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Wray isn't the first FBI official to raise concerns about Chinese government activity and medical research.

Edward You, an agent in the FBI's Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate, [told members of Congress last March](#) that the Bureau has concerns about Chinese government-backed efforts to gather massive amounts of data on Americans' health. In some cases, he said, government-backed hackers have stolen health

data. But in other cases, Americans give away this data to Chinese government-backed labs that specialize in DNA sequencing and diagnostic tests, You said. American health and academic institutions work with these labs, sharing tens of thousands of Americans' personal health information with these government-backed entities. He described the situation as "a ticking time bomb."

Rubio spurred Monday's comments, and said that while the Kremlin poses major threat, China is "the biggest issue of our time." It's a view that's increasingly common in the Trump administration, which has [considered](#) curbing the number of foreign students studying STEM to "ensure that intellectual property is not transferred to our competitors...such as China."

"They're exploiting the very open research and development environment that we have, which we all revere," Wray said in response. "But they're taking advantage of this. One of the things we're trying to do is to view the Chinese threat as not just a whole of government threat, but a whole-of-society threat, on their end. And I think it's going to take a whole-of-society response by us. It's not just the Intelligence Community, but it's raising awareness within our academic sector, within our private sector, as part of defense."

With foreign students taking up a "[large majority](#)" of graduate STEM enrollment, it seems that the FBI has taken this to be an intelligence risk.

Intersections of the academic world and alleged Chinese espionage aren't unprecedented. In 2015, the Justice Department [announced the indictment](#) of six Chinese nationals, including two who met while working on a Defense Department-funded research project as students at a Southern California university. They later stole trade secrets from their employers, which they shared with a university in China, according

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to the indictment, which said that university went on to use the information to get military contracts.

Court filings show the prosecution is underway.

Espionage isn't the only concern Rubio and Wray discussed at the hearing. Rubio asked Wray if he worries about the Chinese government-funded Confucius Institutes, which partner with American universities. The senator said one concern, which he recently shared with Institute-partnered universities in Florida, is that these programs aim to covertly change American public opinion on the Chinese government by whitewashing its human rights abuses.

Neither Rubio nor Wray went into detail about the Institutes. But the FBI Director said the Bureau has opened investigations into some of them.

"We do share concerns about the Confucius Institutes," Wray said. "We've been

watching that development for a while. It's just one of many tools that they take advantage of. We have seen some decrease recently in their own enthusiasm and commitment to that particular program, but it is something that we're watching warily and in certain instances have developed appropriate investigations into them."

John C. Yang, who heads Asian Americans Advancing Justice, called the whole interchange an affront to the American way.

"We cannot have every Chinese student or scientist assumed guilty until proven innocent of a national security threat," he said. "We understand there is a real threat coming out of China, but expect that top-notch intelligence agencies have better tools to rely on than racial profiling every Chinese person coming to America."