

FEATURE

Scientists caught in U.S. crackdown on China

Jon Cohen, David Malakoff

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Neuroscientists Li Xiao-Jiang (left) and Li Shihua (right) deny Emory University's allegations that they did not fully disclose funding and other professional ties to China. PHOTO: LI XIAO-JIANG

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A wide-ranging U.S. government crackdown on federally funded researchers who have allegedly failed to disclose ties to China has ensnared three more senior scientists.

On 16 May, Emory University in Atlanta fired two Chinese American neuroscientists, a married couple who had worked at the university for 23 years, alleging they had “failed to fully disclose foreign sources of research funding and the extent of their work for research institutions and universities in China.” The university also shuttered their lab and revoked the visas of four of their Chinese postdoctoral students. The couple, Li Xiao-Jiang and Li Shihua, has disputed the allegations.

Last week, federal prosecutors charged a physicist formerly at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in New Mexico with lying to officials about his contacts with China's Thousand Talents Program, which since 2008 has used offers of salaries and other support to establish ties with scientists working outside of China.

A 22 May indictment alleges that Turab Lookman, who joined LANL in 1999, lied about applying to and being accepted into the program. Lookman pleaded not guilty to the charges. (Li Xiao-Jiang is also part of the Thousand Talents Program, which he joined in 2010, but has disclosed that tie.)



Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, was one of 55 US institutions investigated by a federal funding agency. Photo: Handout

Both developments come amid growing U.S. government fears that foreign nations, particularly China, are using talent recruitment and other funding programs to forge relationships with researchers in the United States in order to acquire technology and intellectual property.

In response, federal science funding agencies have announced an array of efforts to clamp down on potentially problematic relationships.

The Department of Energy, for example, has moved to bar researchers it funds from participating in talent recruitment programs, and from collaborating on certain kinds of research with scientists from several dozen “sensitive” nations. And the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has told Congress that it is scrutinizing at least 190 grantees who might have violated agency rules by failing to disclose foreign ties or by sharing confidential grant applications.

In a statement to Science, NIH said that since August 2018 it has sent “approximately 60

letters” to institutions notifying them “of concerns with particular investigators.” The statement adds: “While not all individuals that are being reviewed are of Chinese ethnicity, China's Thousand Talents Program is a known prominent player.”

Last month, some of those NIH letters, as well as investigations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), prompted MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, to investigate five Asian researchers, and ultimately oust three it accused of rule violations (Science, 26 April, p. 314). And Emory said in a 23 May statement that a letter from NIH prompted it to investigate and ultimately fire two unidentified faculty members supported by NIH; the Lis confirmed they are the researchers.

The pair, who held five NIH grants, is known for groundbreaking work on developing animal models for studying Huntington disease and other neurological conditions. Both are U.S. citizens. Li Xiao-Jiang holds tenure at Emory and

also has affiliations with Chinese institutions that are disclosed in publications.

In a statement to Science, he said he “was shocked that Emory University would terminate a tenured professor in such an unusual and abrupt fashion and close our combined lab ... without giving me specific details for the reasons.” Emory did not give “any notice or opportunity for us to respond to unverified accusations,” he stated.

Li Xiao-Jiang says Emory's investigation began in November 2018. He believes school officials took action against him and Li Shihua after going through their emails and finding what he calls “unverified information,” including unsigned or draft contracts and patents, as well as discussions about founding a biotechnology company.

The Emory case has further stoked fears among U.S.-based researchers of Chinese ethnicity that they are being unfairly scrutinized. “It's a little disturbing, I must say,” says retired physicist Da Hsuan Feng, who previously worked as vice president of research at the University of Texas in Dallas. “I've been here since 1964, and so I wasn't here during the [former Senator Joseph] McCarthy age, but this is uncomfortable.”

A harsher verdict comes from Shin-Shem Steven Pei, an electrical engineer at the University of Houston who in September 2018 helped organize a meeting between researchers, lawyers, and FBI to discuss espionage investigations of Asian Americans.

Universities and federal agencies are “using Chinese American researchers as scapegoats,” he says, asserting that institutions have done a poor job of helping researchers comply with rules that once received little attention. “If you did not really enforce those rules, then you cannot slam the book on them at this time,” he says.

He and others also wonder whether Emory provided the Lis with due process. As a private university, it has broad leeway to fire

employees, lawyers say. But Feng believes Emory would be well served to publicly provide more detail about the case. “There's a necessity for a certain level of transparency,” Feng says. (Emory told Science it will not comment beyond its statement.)

In contrast to the Lis, Lookman is charged with a federal crime and was taken into custody before being released to home detention this week. Lookman, who has a doctorate in theoretical physics and was awarded one of LANL's highest honors in 2017, faces three charges of making false statements. He allegedly lied about his involvement with the Thousand Talents Program on an employment form in 2017 as well as during 2018 conversations with a counterintelligence officer and an investigator conducting a background check. The charges carry a maximum penalty of 5 years in prison.

The recent cases are unlikely to be the last involving research affiliations with China. Federal officials have said they are scrutinizing a wide range of related activities, and President Donald Trump's administration appears eager to penalize what it sees as unfair practices by the Chinese government. For its part, NIH said in its statement to Science that it is continuing “to remind universities to look closely at their organizations to mitigate unscrupulous practices by individuals that aim to capitalize on the collaborative nature of the U.S. biomedical enterprise.”