

Physics professor accused of espionage talks US-China relations, anti-Asian sentiment

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Xiaoxing Xi, former chair of Temple University's physics department, speaks virtually to University students over Zoom Wednesday evening. Buy this photo

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Jared Dougall For The Daily

In May 2015, the FBI raided the Philadelphia home of Xiaoxing Xi, a respected academic and chair of Temple University's physics department. He was arrested and taken away to be interrogated. United States prosecutors accused him of being a Chinese spy and funneling sensitive information out of the country.

In Sept. 2015, after experts signed affidavits that showed Xi's innocence, the federal government dropped the case.

On Wednesday, Xi spoke virtually to University of Michigan students about his experience and described the ordeal. He said anti-Chinese sentiment led to his prosecution and noted that he isn't the only Chinese-American scientist to be profiled and accused of espionage in this manner.

"The false prosecutions made against me by the government wrecked my life, and that of my family," Xi said. "One day, I was a respected researcher and department chair. Overnight, I was painted as a Chinese spy all over the news and the Internet, and to face the possibility of up to 80 years in prison and \$1 million fine."

David Gerdes, chair of the Physics Department, said there has been an increase in restrictive policies aimed at keeping Chinese students out of American college campuses.

"One recent executive order suspended the visas of researchers from Chinese universities with close ties to the Chinese military or intelligence-gathering agencies," Gerdes said. "A bill called the SECURE CAMPUS Act has been introduced that would prohibit most Chinese nationals from receiving visas for graduate or postgraduate studies in any STEM field. H1B Visas have been suspended through the end of the year."

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Thomas Schwarz, associate professor of physics, spoke at the event and said these restrictions create needless fear, promote harmful anti-Chinese stereotypes and divert talent away from U.S. universities.

"There appears to be a great deal of misplaced fear, stoked by some who take advantage of it for political reasons," Schwarz said. "The impact is not just limited to careless accusations of espionage, such as those faced by Professor Xi ... Historically, we have recruited incredible talent from China that more often than not wants to stay in the US. However, in the past few years, we have had less and less applications to our graduate programs and research positions."

In 2014, Sherry Chen, a hydrologist at the National Weather Service in Wilmington, Ohio, was arrested by the FBI and accused of spying for the Chinese Communist Party. In March 2015, prosecutors dropped the charges without explanation and cleared her of spying. She is still trying to get her job back.

Xi argued that there is a campaign by the federal government against ethnically Chinese scientists that has ruined the lives of many respected scientists and scholars. He is currently suing the federal government.

China has long been a geopolitical rival of the U.S. Since Xi's arrest, tensions have continued to escalate. President Donald Trump has stoked a trade war with China and has been criticized for perpetuating anti-Chinese sentiment during the pandemic for using racial epithets to refer to the coronavirus.

Indigo: The LSA Asian and Asian American Faculty Alliance, the Physics Department and the U-M Association of Chinese Professors sponsored the event. Hitomi Tonomura, chair of Indigo and director of the Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies program, said Xi offered valuable insight into issues of suspected espionage.

"He is a guest who can speak to larger issues of academic freedom," Tonomura said. "We chose him because he is a very well-known advocate on this issue."

Since Xi was falsely accused, he has spoken out about the racial profiling of Chinese scholars, the importance of defending the integrity of American research institutions and scientific openness and collaboration. This year, the American Physical Society awarded Xi the Andrei Sakharov Prize, which is given to human rights advocates in the physics community.

"I see (the award) as an affirmation of my speaking up for the scientific community, which was what I'm doing here today," Xi said.

Xi also recounted his legal battle with the federal government and emphasized the importance of the JASON Report on Fundamental Research Security, which opposes racial profiling of Chinese scholars.

JASON is an independent group of scientists that advises the U.S. government on science and technology matters. All of its members, who remain anonymous, have security clearances and access to classified information.

"I was impressed with the JASON Report. I didn't know it existed," Astronomy Professor Sally Oey said. "I think it deserves to be widely communicated."

The JASON Report proposes addressing Chinese meddling in U.S. research while maintaining research integrity by investigating and adjudicating potential misconduct in research processes.

Amid rising tensions with China, the Trump administration is seeking to revise a national security division directive that sets out policies related to the research produced at federal funded colleges. Reversing this could potentially give the government the power to monitor and interfere with research. Xi said this is an existential threat to fundamental research.

Toward the end of his speech, Xi showed a clip of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo referring to U.S. foreign policy on China as "Cold War 2.0." He showed images of Japanese internment camps and spoke about how he thought the rhetoric against Chinese researchers in American institutions echoed Joseph McCarthy's infamous anti-communism speeches from the 1950s.

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LSA junior Kristina Lewis attended the event and said it made her think more about the wide-ranging effects of anti-Chinese sentiment.

"It's reasonable to be cautious, but pointing a finger at a whole group of people is another story," Lewis said. "I think that promotes a really xenophobic environment."

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