



U.S. Response To China's Talent Plan Is Described As Heavy-Handed

NPR Morning Edition Morning Edition 11:00 AM EST

February 17, 2020 Monday

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Length: 1139 words

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Body

NOEL KING: A scientist at Harvard is being accused of trading knowledge for money and then lying about it. Prosecutors say he set up a lab in China in exchange for hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Chinese government. He didn't disclose to U.S. agencies that he'd taken that money. The government alleges it's part of a broad plot to steal U.S. technology. But as NPR's Geoff Brumfiel reports, other academics are questioning his arrest.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: Until late last month, Charles Lieber lived the quiet life of an elite American scientist. His lab at Harvard University researched things like how to meld tiny electronics with the brain. And then on January 28, the FBI came knocking on his door.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ANDREW LELLING: Good morning. We're here today to announce three separate cases highlighting the ongoing threat posed by Chinese economic espionage and research theft in the United States.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: That's audio from a press conference later in the day by law enforcement officials. Lieber was accused of making false statements about his involvement in a Chinese scientific recruitment effort known as the Thousand Talents Plan.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ANDREW LELLING: The complaint alleges that Dr. Lieber signed a contract with a Chinese university in Wuhan and was paid up to \$50,000 per month.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: The criminal complaint alleges he received over \$100,000 in living expenses, over a million for research and then lied about it to the U.S. government, who is also giving him millions of dollars in federal grants and to Harvard, whose name was attached to the lab he set up at the Wuhan University of Technology. Lieber's attorneys declined to talk to NPR about the allegations, but others say the situation is more complicated than prosecutors make it out to be.

FRANK WU: This is a big, big case.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: Frank Wu is a professor at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law. He tracks Chinese espionage cases.

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FRANK WU: It's symbolic. This is a case that's all about U.S.-China relations. It's about competition. It's about how science should be done.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: And it's part of a much larger effort by federal law enforcement. Since 2018, the Justice Department has been carrying out what it calls its China Initiative, a broad plan to tackle what it sees as a coordinated effort by the Chinese government to steal U.S. technology and know-how. The initiative has brought charges against dozens in the past few years, but these kinds of cases aren't simple, especially in the world of fundamental research. In the spring of 2015, Xi Xiaoxing, a physicist at Temple University in Philadelphia, was awoken by a pounding on his door.

XI XIAOXING: These arm agents are running through my halls and pointing their guns to my wife and daughters. And they took me out in handcuffs.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: Xi was accused of sharing sensitive technology with his collaborators in China, but he never did. And what's more, he says, everything he did share was already public because the findings of basic research aren't secret. They're published in scientific journals.

XI XIAOXING: Academic espionage - it's a contradiction. I mean, everything we are doing is fundamental research. There is nothing to steal. They can just sit there and read your paper.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: The federal prosecutor who's pursuing the case against Harvard chemist Charles Lieber actually agrees. Andrew Lelling is the United States attorney for the District of Massachusetts and the voice you heard right at the start of the story. He told me that China's Thousand Talents Program, the one that signs up researchers like Lieber, is brilliantly simple.

ANDREW LELLING: All the Thousand Talents Program does is induce people doing research in the United States to come to China and help them do the same research by offering them money. And that's not illegal, per se. You can do that.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: But, Lelling says, you have to disclose the money you received to funding agencies and to your home university. That's in part because federal research agencies don't want to pay researchers for doing the same science twice in the U.S. and in China.

ANDREW LELLING: You need to tell them whether you also have affiliation with a foreign power or a foreign university. And hiding that can get you in trouble, meaning that can be a federal crime.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: Lieber isn't Chinese, but many of the researchers getting arrested or fired for supposedly taking money from the Thousand Talents Program are Chinese nationals or Chinese-American citizens. That's led some to assert that the government is racially profiling. It's a charge Lelling absolutely denies.

ANDREW LELLING: If it was the French government that was attempting to steal U.S. technology in a massive, decade-long campaign, we'd look for French people. But it's not. It's the Chinese government.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: Still, law professor Frank Wu, who tracks these cases, says the recent increase in criminal prosecutions marks a big change. Up until a few years ago, universities were urging their researchers to collaborate with China. And if there was a funding issue...

FRANK WU: Maybe you would face some discipline from your employer, but you wouldn't face being fired and going to prison and having your name dragged through the mud as a spy.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL: Wu says he fears this new, in his eyes, heavy-handed response could end up alienating tens of thousands of students and researchers of Chinese origin, researchers that he believes provide the U.S. far more than anything China's getting through its Thousand Talents Program.

FRANK WU: Scientific progress here, entrepreneurial success here has been driven in large part by Asian immigrants. So we need the talent to want to come to these shores.

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GEOFF BRUMFIEL: Wu acknowledges there have been clear violations of U.S. policy around the program. But criminal prosecution, he believes, will do more harm than good.

Geoff Brumfiel, NPR News, Washington.

Load-Date: March 4, 2020

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