

Crouching Trouble, Hidden Discrimination – the Predicament of Chinese Scientists in the United States

By *Zhuo (Adam) Chen, October 2021*

The white paper by Committee of 100 and Professor Jenny J. Lee, Center for the Study of Higher Education in the University of Arizona College of Education, is a timely piece to elucidate the predicament of Chinese scientists in the United States and the harm of the discriminatory treatment to them on American interests.

The research behind the white paper was co-led by Professor Lee. The research team surveyed graduate students, postdocs, and faculty members in the STEM fields at the top 50 universities in the US, intending to understand how research and academics have been affected by the limitations that have been placed on international exchange with China and the impact on professors and researchers who are of Chinese descent.

The discriminatory treatments against professors and researchers who are of Chinese descent are real. Scientists of Chinese descent are more likely to be charged but less likely to be convicted.¹ According to Dr. Andrew Kim, “one in four people of Chinese or Asian descent possibly falsely accused” – they were charged but are never convicted of any crimes or convicted of only false statements or other process crimes.² Professor Lee, on the other hand, documented in the white paper the anxieties among the professors and researchers with Chinese heritage, with “42.2% of the Chinese scientists felt racially profiled”, “23.4% of the Chinese scientists reported that their academic institution has discouraged collaboration with China,” and “38.4% of the Chinese scientists experienced more difficulty in obtaining funding.” One in two Chinese scientists reported, “feeling considerable fear and/or anxiety that they were surveilled by the US government.”

The harms of the anxieties, ultimately stemming from the discriminatory treatment, are tangible on the scientists and their families. Professor Lee reported, while both Chinese and non-Chinese scientists recognized the value of Chinese scientists and supported collaboration with China, more than 40% of the Chinese scientists have decided to limit communication with collaborators in China, 23.8% decided not to involve China in future projects. If one considers those merely dry statistics, I encourage them to read the work of Siu and Chun,³ which provided narratives of the story of Wen Ho Lee twenty years ago and what happened to researchers at MD Anderson Cancer Center, Temple University, and Emory University in recent years.

Much harder to fathom is the damages to American’s research productivity and moral standard. Several prominent researchers who have been charged but not convicted have had setbacks with their employment in the United States, only to be welcomed by the Chinese institutions that have long wished to have them full time. By forcing the scientists to leave their US positions with superficial and

¹ Kim, A. C. (2018). Prosecuting Chinese Spies: An Empirical Analysis of the Economic Espionage Act. *Cardozo L. Rev.*, 40, 749.

² Racial Disparities in Economic Espionage Act Prosecutions: A Windown into the New Red Scare. Andrew Chongseh Kim ad Committee of 100, September 21, 2021. <https://www.committee100.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Whitepaper-Final-9.21-UPDATE-compressed.pdf>

³ Siu, L., & Chun, C. (2020). Yellow Peril and Techno-orientalism in the Time of Covid-19: Racialized Contagion, Scientific Espionage, and Techno-Economic Warfare. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 23(3), 421–440. doi:10.1353/jaas.2020.0033

frivolous charges, the US Government has done a service to China, while harming the research productivity at home.

It is a questionable premise to assume that severing or undue scrutinization of the scientific and educational exchanges with China will benefit American interests. Professor Lee and her coauthor have shown that US-China collaboration has intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic started.⁴ In my paper with Dr. Jeffrey Koplan, former director of the US CDC, and Dr. Liming Li, founding director-general of the China CDC, we have argued that the US-China exchange in health and medicine has benefited both sides.⁵ Much to the chagrin of the global public health communities, US-China tensions in other areas have spread to the field of health and medicine, right at the moment when close collaboration is in dire need to contain a pandemic.

The discrimination against Chinese scientists, often hidden in the charges, casts doubt on our fairness and confidence in the processes. The United States has long put behind it the history of blatant racial discrimination marked by segregation, Japanese Internment camps, and the Chinese Exclusion Act. However, the statistics brought by Dr. Andrew Kim question the fairness in the treatment of the Chinese scientists in the present tense. Such discriminatory practices compromise the confidence in our fair process among those being affected.

It is welcoming news that the Committee of 100 and Professor Lee have taken on this task to assess the impact of the discriminatory actions towards scientists of Chinese descent in the US. As Ambassador Gary Lock forcefully put in his remarks, “the method the U.S. Justice Department has adapted through efforts such as the ‘China Initiative’ results in unacceptable damage to the lives of innocent Chinese Americans and, if left uncorrected, will likely harm vital American economic and national security interests.”⁶ It is urgent to reverse the discriminatory practices and hate crimes – as the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act and the exposure and shutdown of the “rogue” unit with the Department of Commerce have rightfully done.^{7,8}

It is America’s strength to correct its wrong. Thanks to the efforts of Committee of 100, Representative Grace Meng, and Senator Mazie Hirono, Representative Judy Chu, Representative Ted Liu, and many others, that strength will benefit all Americans of all facets, by birth or naturalized, from China, Cuba, Japan, or India. It is my hope that Americans of all races, ethnicities, countries of origin, men or women, will continue to be blessed by the strength.

Disclosure: Dr. Zhuo Chen is an Associate Professor of Health Policy and Management at the University of Georgia. He has a 20% summer fractional appointment with the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, the China campus of the University of Nottingham, UK.

⁴ Lee JJ, Haupt JP. Scientific Collaboration on COVID-19 Amidst Geopolitical Tensions between the US and China. *The Journal of Higher Education* 2020: 1-27.

⁵ Li L, Wang K, Chen Z, Koplan JP. US–China health exchange and collaboration following COVID-19. *Lancet*, 2021; Apr 8;S0140-6736(21)00734-0. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00734-0.

⁶ Letter from Gary Locke, Chairman of Committee of 100, September 21, 2021.

<https://www.committee100.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Whitepaper-Final-9.21-UPDATE-compressed.pdf>

⁷ S.937 COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/937/text>

⁸ Commerce unit went "rogue" with race-based investigations, Senate report says, Jacob Kutson, July 17, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/senate-commerce-unit-race-based-investigations-d953ad5b-d380-431d-873b-7eb3b1099b72.html>

**Professor Chen was a member of the academic advisory group, working with Committee of 100 and the University of Arizona on the project "Racial Profiling Among Scientists of Chinese Descent and Consequences for the U.S. Scientific Community."*