



## **Amid Sino-U.S. new cold war, American scholars decouple from China**

**Dr Christina Lin**

**November 2020**

### **Abstract**

---

After years of disillusionment and distrust between U.S. and China, Washington's policy towards China has now changed from one of "engagement" to an all-encompassing "decoupling" including cultural and educational exchanges. In this new Cold War, Washington is clamping down on people-to-people exchanges, preventing Chinese students from entering science fields in the U.S., while FBI's "China Initiative" on economic espionage is casting a wide net across universities to prosecute researchers for their China ties. As many innocent Chinese-American scholars are caught in the net, they are removing themselves from the crosshairs and cutting ties to China.

### **About ISPSW**

---

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

In the ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, which occasions both major opportunities and risks, decision-makers in the economic and political arena depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, the economy, international relations, and security/ defense. ISPSW network experts have worked – in some cases for decades – in executive positions and have at their disposal a wide range of experience in their respective fields of expertise.



## Analysis

---

On 14 October, Brookings Institution scholars Cheng Li and Ryan McElveen penned an article highlighting the decoupling of people-to-people exchange as the latest casualty in the new cold war between U.S. and China.<sup>1</sup>

After years of disputes, disillusionment, disappointment and distrust between the two countries, US policy towards China has now changed from one of “engagement” to an all-encompassing “decoupling” including cultural and educational exchanges.

To that end, Washington has eliminated the Peace Corp program as well as the Fulbright scholarship program in China and Hong Kong, suspended entry of more than 1,000 Chinese graduate students and researchers suspected of connection to the “military-civil fusion strategy” of the People’s Liberation Army, limited number of Chinese graduate students allowed to major in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) at U.S. universities, and proposed travel ban on Chinese Communist Party members which number at 92 million people, all in an effort to prevent Chinese citizens infiltrating these programs to conduct economic espionage.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, decoupling goes both ways, and in addition to warding off Chinese citizens from the U.S., U.S. citizens are also decoupling from China. Especially if they are ethnic Chinese.

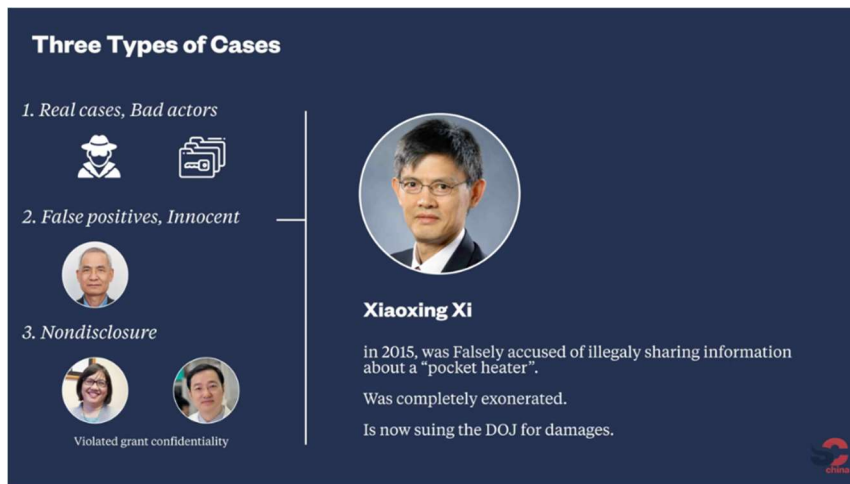
### FBI’s “China Initiative” and Chinese-Americans in the Crosshairs

Two weeks after the Brookings article was published, on 30 October, *SupChina* released an educational video for Chinese-American researchers on how to protect themselves from false charges and arrests by the FBI at a time when they are targeted for increased scrutiny.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cheng Li and Ryan McElveen, “The deception and detriment of U.S.-China cultural and educational decoupling”, Brookings Institution, October 14, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/10/14/the-deception-and-detriment-of-us-china-cultural-and-educational-decoupling/>

<sup>2</sup> Peter Hessler, “The Peace Corps Breaks Ties with China”, *The New Yorker*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/03/16/the-peace-corps-breaks-ties-with-china>; Elizabeth Redden, “Trump targets Fulbrights in China, Hong Kong”, *Inside Higher Ed*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/16/trump-targets-fulbright-china-hong-kong>; “Proclamation on the Suspension of Entry as Nonimmigrants of Certain Students and Researchers from the People’s Republic of China”, The White House, May 29, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspension-entry-nonimmigrants-certain-students-researchers-peoples-republic-china/>; “China says a U.S. travel ban on Communist Party members would be pathetic”, *BBC*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53427782>



**Three Types of Cases**

1. Real cases, Bad actors
2. False positives, Innocent
3. Nondisclosure  
Violated grant confidentiality

**Xiaoxing Xi**  
in 2015, was Falsely accused of illegally sharing information about a "pocket heater".  
Was completely exonerated.  
Is now suing the DOJ for damages.

Source: *SupChina*, October 30, 2020 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krpVGzeJH1w&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krpVGzeJH1w&feature=emb_logo)

Entitled “Scientists in the Crosshairs” and captioned “*We interview experts and gather their best advice for how to avoid being wrongly prosecuted for non-disclosure and other administrative wrongdoings*”, the video showed interviews with lawyers, individuals from Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC) that defends civil rights, university professors, and Chinese-American scholars who have been wrongfully arrested for alleged espionage.<sup>3</sup>

They highlight the FBI’s “China Initiative” launched in February 2018, where Director Christopher Wray described the threat from China as “a whole-of-society threat”, and has designated some China-related cases as “academic espionage.”<sup>4</sup>

It was the first time the Department of Justice undertook an initiative to focus on a specific country (and ethnic group), and since then many suspects, majority of whom were ethnic Chinese, have been arrested and charged. By July this year, Wray claimed that half of the nearly 5,000 active FBI counterintelligence cases underway were related to China, and the bureau was opening a new China-related counterintelligence case almost every 10 hours.<sup>5</sup>

Because the “China Initiative” frames Chinese espionage as conducted by “non-traditional collectors”—i.e. academics and researchers—Wray states U.S. requires a “whole-of-society” response as well, and as such the FBI is investigating researchers and recruiting informants across U.S. universities and think tanks.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Springer, “Scientists in the Crosshairs: What should Chinese and Chinese-American researchers do amid U.S. crackdown on ‘China ties?’”, *SupChina*, October 30, 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/10/30/scientists-in-the-crosshairs-what-should-chinese-and-chinese-american-researchers-do-amid-u-s-crackdown-on-china-ties/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1802/13/cnr.04.html>; Michael Kranz, “The director of the FBI says the whole of Chinese society is a threat to the U.S.—and that Americans must step up to defend themselves”, *CNN*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-threat-to-america-fbi-director-warns-2018-2>; Margaret K Lewis, “Criminalizing China”, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* Vol. 111, No. 1, 2020 [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3600580](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3600580)

<sup>5</sup> FBI Director Christopher Wray, “The threat posed by the Chinese Government and the Chinese Communist Party to the Economic and National Security of the United States”, remarks at the Hudson Institute, July 7, 2020, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/the-threat-posed-by-the-chinese-government-and-the-chinese-communist-party-to-the-economic-and-national-security-of-the-united-states>



However, because not all agents in the “China Initiative” have subject matter expertise in the STEM field, or even on China (many have background on organized crime and counter-terrorism), the result is numerous “false positive” cases where innocent people were wrongly charged. Also, putting the initiative as FBI’s top national security priority may produce pressures to fulfill quotas and a rush to open investigations.<sup>6</sup>

Currently there are three types of cases: (1) Real cases of bad actors; (2) False positives involving innocent individuals; (3) Non-disclosure in paper work that violated grant confidentiality.

Regarding the first type, there are indeed bad Chinese actors sent by the Communist Party to conduct malign activities of IP theft and industrial espionage. For example, Chi Mak, a defense contractor, was sentenced on March 24, 2008 for conspiring to export sensitive defense technology to China.

The second type are the false positives, such as the famous case of physics Professor Xiaoxing Xi from Temple University, who was falsely accused of illegally sharing information about a “pocket heater” but was later exonerated.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, his career and livelihood were in tatters, and he is now suing FBI for damages.

The third type are non-disclosures and improper paperwork regarding federal grants. Grantees from the National Institute of Health, National Science Foundation, and Department of Energy are required to disclose supplemental income, conflicts of interest, and one such case is Dr. Xifeng Wu from University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Centre who allegedly did not disclose paid work in China.<sup>8</sup> Although nondisclosure and administrative wrongdoings are not espionage, she was deemed an oncological double agent and placed on administrative leave during investigation, and ultimately took early retirement from the cancer centre.

Many FBI cases fall within the third type regarding nondisclosure, which is compounded by changing standards in university research integrity offices wherein professors and researchers may not have kept up to date.

For example, Catherine Pan, head of Dorsey and Whitney’s U.S.-China practice, mentioned that tenured professors inform her they know how to fill out grant applications. They say they have been tenured for 25-30 years, are not new assistant professors from the post-doc program filling out applications, and are not doing anything wrong.

### **For now, cutting ties with China**

Nonetheless, Professor Xioxing Xi from Temple University has a stern warning for Chinese-American researchers that “You don’t have to do anything wrong to be targeted.” Indeed in the face of various cases of false positives which prompted Congress to launch an investigation into the FBI for conducting racial profile, Chinese-Americans researchers are cutting ties with China.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> “FBI Director Christopher Wray says China is agency’s top counterintelligence priority”, *CBS News*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fbi-director-christopher-wray-china-a-top-priority-in-u-s-counterintelligence-mission/>

<sup>7</sup> Kimberly Yam, “Chinese-American Professor Sues FBI Agents After Being Accused of Espionage”, *Huffington Post*, May 12, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/xiaoxing-xi-sues-fbi\\_n\\_5909e60ee4b0bb2d0873e21a](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/xiaoxing-xi-sues-fbi_n_5909e60ee4b0bb2d0873e21a)

<sup>8</sup> Peter Waldman, “The U.S. is purging Chinese Americans From Top Cancer Research”, *Bloomberg News*, June 13, 2019, <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/pharma-and-life-sciences/the-u-s-is-purging-chinese-americans-from-top-cancer-research>; “United Chinese Americans (UCA) Raises Concerns for Chinese American Scientists as Collateral Damage in the Crossfire between the United States and China due to Deteriorating Relations”, April 25, 2019, <https://ucausa.org/uca-raises-concerns-for-chinese-american-scientists-as-collateral-damage/>;

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-06-13/the-u-s-is-purging-chinese-americans-from-top-cancer-research>  
<sup>9</sup> Kimmy Yam, “Democratic lawmakers launch investigation into FBI handling of Chinese espionage”, *NBC News*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/democratic-lawmakers-launch-investigation-fbi-handling-chinese-espionage-n1142161>



With the perception that any contact with China has become radioactive, Catherine Pan mentioned faculty members are now saying “Going forward, I’ll make sure I have nothing to do with China”, “I will not travel to China to attend academic conferences”, “I will not admit Chinese PhD students”, and “I will not co-publish papers with Chinese researchers.”

Pan informed them none of these activities are illegal, but for many Chinese-Americans it’s a different experience. For them, to be targeted by their fellow Americans in the FBI, and the risk of punishment for “researching while Asian”, “guilt by association”, and memory of how Japanese- Americans were profiled as “enemy alien” during WWII, outweigh any potential benefits of exchanges with China.<sup>10</sup> So long as China continues to send malign actors to conduct economic espionage and FBI counters with the China Initiative, the safe course forward for Chinese-Americans is to remove themselves from the crosshairs and decouple from China.

\*\*\*

**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article first appeared in *The Times of Israel* on November 7, 2020.

### About the Author of this Issue

---

Dr. Christina Lin is a California-based foreign policy analyst. She has extensive US government experience working on national security policy planning, including at DoD, State, and NSC, and was a research consultant at Jane’s Information Group’s Chemical, Biological, Radiological & Nuclear Assessments Intelligence Centre.



Christina Lin

---

<sup>10</sup> Allie Ferguson, “Going to War as an ‘Enemy Alien’: A Japanese American Vet Looks Back on World War II”, December 3, 2016, <https://www.knkx.org/post/going-war-enemy-alien-japanese-american-vet-looks-back-world-war-ii>