
THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
SOUTHERN DISTRICT *of* TEXAS

[U.S. Attorneys](#) » [Southern District of Texas](#) » [News](#)

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Southern District of Texas

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, August 24, 2020

Texas professor and NASA researcher arrested on charges related to China's Talents Program

Texas A&M University professor working on U.S. space projects allegedly hid affiliations with Chinese state-owned academic and commercial institutions

HOUSTON – A criminal complaint has been unsealed charging a 53-year-old College Station man for conspiracy, making false statements and wire fraud.

Texas A&M University (TAMU) Professor Zhengdong Cheng is expected to make his initial appearance before U.S. Magistrate Judge Sam Sheldon today at 2 p.m. in Houston. Authorities took him into custody Sunday, Aug. 23.

Cheng allegedly led a team conducting research for NASA. According to the criminal complaint, for several years he willfully took steps to obscure his affiliations and collaboration with a Chinese University and at least one Chinese-owned company. The terms of Cheng's grant prohibited participation, collaboration or coordination with China, any Chinese-owned company or any Chinese University, according to the charges.

"China is building an economy and academic institutions with bricks stolen from others all around the world," said U.S. Attorney Ryan K. Patrick. "While 1.4

million foreign researchers and academics are here in the U.S. for the right reasons, the Chinese Talents Program exploits our open and free universities. These conflicts must be disclosed, and we will hold those accountable when such conflict violates the law.”

“Once again we have witnessed the criminal conflicts that can arise from participation in the Chinese government’s talent program,” said Assistant Attorney General for National Security John C. Demers. “Professor Cheng allegedly made false statements to his university and to NASA regarding his affiliations with the Chinese government. The Department of Justice will continue seeking to illuminate the darkness around these talent programs and expose the exploitation of our nation and our prized research institutions.”

The charges allege Cheng and TAMU received funds based on Cheng knowingly providing false information to TAMU and consequently to NASA. In addition to the funds, Cheng personally benefited from his affiliation with TAMU and NASA with increased access to unique NASA resources, such as the International Space Station, according to the complaint. This access allegedly allowed Cheng to further his standing in China at Guangdong University of Technology and other universities. The charges further allege he held senior research positions there unknown to TAMU and NASA and was able to serve in the People’s Republic of China Talents program.

China’s Talents Plans are allegedly designed to attract, recruit and cultivate high-level scientific talent in furtherance of China’s scientific development, economic prosperity and national security.

“NASA’s funding restrictions are in place to protect taxpayer-financed research dollars and intellectual property,” said Special Agent in Charge Mark Zielinski, NASA Office of Inspector General (OIG) - Eastern Field Office. “We will continue pursue anyone who attempts to circumvent these guidelines and conceal affiliations with Chinese institutions and companies in order to obtain NASA grant money.”

“Dr. Cheng is accused of hiding his affiliation with the Guangdong University of Technology, along with other foreign universities, while disregarding the rules established under his NASA contract during his employment at TAMU,” said FBI Houston Special Agent in Charge Perrye K. Turner. “These alleged actions came to light through the tireless work of the FBI-Bryan Resident Agency and NASA-OIG investigative teams. We are grateful to TAMU, TAMU System and TAMU

Engineering Experiment Station for providing significant assistance through their partnership with us throughout this case.”

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Carolyn Ferko and S. Mark McIntyre are prosecuting the case with the assistance of trial attorney Matthew McKenzie of the National Security Division’s Counterintelligence and Export Control Section.

A criminal complaint is a formal accusation of criminal conduct, not evidence. A defendant is presumed innocent unless convicted through due process of law.

Component(s):

USAO - Texas, Southern

Updated August 24, 2020