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DOJ: Texas A&M Professor Indicted; Lieber Faces New Charges

Texas A&M University (TAMU) professor Zhengdong Cheng was arrested Aug. 23 and charged with conspiracy, making false statements and wire fraud in connection with payments the Department of Justice (DOJ) said were provided by a Chinese university while he was also the recipient of awards from NASA. As described in an Aug. 24 DOJ press release, “Cheng and TAMU [allegedly] 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.”

Cheng, DOJ said, “willfully took steps to obscure his affiliations and collaboration” with universities and a company in China. The government acknowledged “TAMU, TAMU System and TAMU Engineering Experiment Station for providing significant assistance through their partnership with us throughout this case.” According to information from an FBI agent that was included in the criminal complaint reviewed by RRC, Cheng was the principal investigator (PI) on a TAMU research team that received a NASA award of \$746,967, which spanned from September 2013 to August of this year. Numerous publications appeared with Cheng’s name and listed affiliations with Chinese institutions during the same period, the agent said.

[Link to Cheng indictment announcement](#)

In related news, a Harvard University professor is facing a new indictment that adds charges for “tax offenses” to those disclosed earlier this year also stemming from alleged payments from China. On July 28, Charles Lieber, on leave as chair of the Chemistry and Chemical Biology Department, “was indicted by a federal grand jury in Boston on two counts of making and subscribing a false income tax return and two counts of failing to file reports of foreign bank and financial accounts,” DOJ announced. Lieber is accused of entering into a three-year Thousand Talents contract under which Wuhan University of Technology paid him “a salary of up to \$50,000 per month, living expenses of up to \$150,000 and [an award of] more than \$1.5 million to establish a research lab at WUT.” Payments were reportedly made in 2013 and 2015, and DOJ alleged that in 2018 and 2019, “Lieber lied to federal authorities about his involvement in the Thousand Talents Plan and his affiliation with WUT.”

This is the third time charges have been added to Lieber’s case. Lieber, who was the PI for more than \$15 million in federal research grants from 2008 to 2019, was charged in January with one count of making a false statement, with a second count added in June. “The charge of making false statements provides for a sentence of up to five years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000,” DOJ said. “The charge of making and subscribing false income tax returns provides for a sentence of up to three years in prison, one year of supervised release and a \$100,000 fine.” Failing to file a foreign account may result in “a sentence of up to five

years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000.”

[Link to Lieber indictment announcement](#)

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