

MIT faculty defend professor against trumped-up charges related to China ties

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In a letter to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) President L. Rafael Reif, a draft of which was posted to Twitter, 100 MIT faculty members issued a resounding defense of their colleague, Professor Gang Chen, who was indicted last week on charges of wire fraud and tax violations and failing to disclose financial ties to China.

The Massachusetts US Attorney's Office issued a press release January 20 reporting that Chen, the director of the MIT Pappalardo Micro/Nano Engineering Laboratory and director of the Solid-State Solar Thermal Energy Conversion Center (S3TEC), was charged in a criminal complaint and arrested on January 14.

The press release states: "Since 2012, Chen has allegedly held various appointments with the PRC [People's Republic of China] designed to promote the PRC's technological and scientific development by providing advice and expertise—sometimes directly to PRC government officials—and often in exchange for financial compensation. This includes acting as an 'overseas expert' for the PRC government at the request of the PRC Consulate Office in New York and serving as a member of at least two PRC Talent Programs. Since 2013, Chen allegedly received approximately \$29 million of foreign funding, including \$19 million from the PRC's Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech)."

The charges of wire fraud carry a sentence of up to 20 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000, and the charge of "making false statements" carries up to five years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000.

Chen pleaded not guilty to all charges in US District Court in Boston and was released on bond. His attorney, Robert Fisher, said in a statement that Chen "has dedicated his life to scientific advancement in mechanical engineering. He loves the United States and looks forward to vigorously defending these allegations."

Gang Chen is a 56-year-old naturalized US citizen who was born in China. He has a highly accomplished record as a scientific researcher and teacher. According to his curriculum vitae, Chen has published some 400 technical

articles and 24 book chapters and attended over 450 invited talks around the world.

According to Clarivate Analytics, he is among the world's most cited researchers in the physics and materials categories. Professor Chen has supervised more than 80 M.S. and Ph.D. student theses and has over 60 postdoctoral visiting scholars.

He is a recipient of the K.C. Wong Education Foundation fellowship and a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellowship. Chen received a National Science Foundation Young Investigator Award, an R&D 100 award, a Heat Transfer Memorial Award from the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, an Erigen Medal from the Society of Engineering Science, and the MIT Capers and Marion McDonald Award for Excellence in Mentoring and Advising. Cheng is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Physical Society and the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

Chen achieved a Ph.D. from UC Berkeley Mechanical Engineering in 1993 and has worked at MIT since 2004.

In a letter issued January 22, MIT President Reif said of the collaboration with SUSTech, "While Professor Chen is its inaugural MIT faculty director, this is not an individual collaboration; it is a departmental one, supported by the Institute." He added, "These funds are about advancing the work of a group of colleagues and the research and educational mission of MIT."

The faculty letter to the MIT president states that "we are writing to encourage that you and MIT continue to stand forthrightly, proudly, and energetically behind Gang Chen." The authors present a detailed refutation of the allegations against Chen, whom they describe as "a truly beloved teacher, scholar, scientist, mentor, colleague, and world leading academic."

The authors state, "We are troubled that the complaint against Gang vilifies what would be considered normal academic and research activities, including promoting MIT's global mission." The faculty members add that they

“are baffled by many elements of the official complaint” and associated public statements against Chen.

“The official complaint is filled with allegations and innuendo based on what are in fact some of the most routine and even innocuous elements of our professional lives. Standard practices such as writing recommendations for our students, so that they might receive fellowships or other prestigious and well-deserved career advancements, are portrayed as some sort of collusion with outside forces in an effort to help them steal American technology,” the letter states.

“Our routine participation in the evaluation of research proposals seems to be viewed in a similar manner. The fact that we do not report all these activities in our own research proposals is used as a basis for allegations of intentional wrongdoing, when in fact information about these practices is a well known and routine requirement of our job. In many respects, the complaint against Gang Chen is a complaint against all of us, and an affront to any citizen who values science and the scientific enterprise.”

Of the claim that Chen received payments, the faculty members say that their “understanding is that Gang did not receive \$29 million, and MIT was the recipient of this money, which benefited the Institute, the research programs of many of its faculty, and its students. Singling him and his research group out as the ‘sole’ recipient is simply wrong. The partnership with SUSTech was approved and overseen by MIT at the highest levels.”

Cheng’s colleagues reject the claim that SUSTech operates as a proxy for the Chinese government, stating that “MIT has created a formal Center with SUSTech University, it is MIT who appointed Gang as the Faculty Leader of this Center. The mission of this center is to encourage scientific and educational exchange.”

They point out that MIT has similar relationships with universities and other entities from other countries, and that “Most major universities in the world are public institutions and can be described reasonably as belonging to some arm of their country’s governments. If leaders in the US government believe cooperative research relationships with them are improper, the issue could be addressed legislatively or with executive authority.”

In conclusion, the faculty members “urge that MIT assume leadership in transforming this difficult time to a learning moment, in which the allegations against Gang Chen are discussed in the context of defending academic freedom in this country. In many respects the defense of Gang Chen is the defense of the scientific enterprise that we all hold dear. We are all Gang Chen.”

Chen is the latest victim in an assault on scientists, intensified under the “China Initiative,” created in

November 2018 by former Attorney General Jeff Sessions. One year after the creation of this initiative, the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations released a bipartisan report which concluded that foreign countries “seek to exploit America’s openness to advance their own national interests,” and that “the most aggressive of them has been China.”

As the WSWS has reported, the China initiative is a continuation of a decadeslong pressure campaign by the US ruling class in its drive for global domination. This campaign continues regardless whether the White House is occupied by a Republican or Democratic president.

Prior to assuming office, Biden made clear that he would continue Washington’s confrontation with and military preparations against China. In a November 16 article entitled, “Biden likely to remain tough on Chinese tech like Huawei, but with more help from allies,” the *Washington Post* included the following reference:

“The United States does need to get tough with China. If China has its way, it will keep robbing the United States and American companies of their technology and intellectual property,” Biden wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in the spring, echoing many of Trump’s complaints. “It will also keep using subsidies to give its state-owned enterprises an unfair advantage—and a leg up on dominating the technologies and industries of the future.”

A continuation of the anti-China policy has been spelled out in Senate hearings for Biden’s national security cabinet. Most notably, Anthony Blinken, the nominee for secretary of state, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “I also believe that President Trump was right in taking a tougher approach to China. I disagree very much with the way that he went about it in a number of areas, but the basic principle was the right one, and I think that’s actually helpful to our foreign policy.”



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