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## Academics' Motivations to Engage in Espionage for the People's Republic of China

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Academics' Motivations to Engage in Espionage for the People's Republic of China

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**Honors Research Project**

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*The University of Akron*

**Abstract**

To remain a global superpower, China relies on the theft of intellectual property to continue economic growth and technology research. China co-opts students and researchers working in the United States to steal sensitive information, research, and technology. Using the analysis of five case studies, individual motivations for participating in this type of espionage, such as the Thousand Talents Program, are identified as primarily money and secondarily ego. They will continue to target students and researchers to conduct espionage because it is suited to their strengths, successful, and very efficient. As the global stage becomes increasingly competitive in defense technologies and economically, it is expected China will maintain their standing by devoting significant energy and resources to the theft of intellectual property. Understanding why academics engage in intellectual property theft on behalf of China could be critical to mitigating the threat in the future.

**Table of Contents**

Title Page	1
Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
Introduction	4
Hypothesis and Methods	6
Chinese Espionage Using Academics	9
Analysis	12
Conclusion	19
Works Cited	21

## **Introduction**

As adversaries, the United States and China compete on the world stage in a multitude of arenas including defense, commerce, and technology. While they are heavily economically reliant on one another, they are also engaged in a technology and information war to remain world superpowers and gain an advantage on the other nation. To gain such an advantage, China often employs methods such as espionage and theft of U.S. technologies and research.

On September 29, 1988, China detonated a neutron bomb for the first time. However, China did not use technology developed in China. The technology used to detonate this bomb originated from the United States, an FBI investigation found (Eftimiades 2014). This marked the first time that Chinese theft of intellectual property from the United States was identified. With China's 200+ talent recruitment programs, and especially after the implementation of the Thousand Talents Program in 2008, "China's technology development and intellectual property portfolio has skyrocketed," (Kang 2020). In 2019, China overtook the United States in applications for international patents for the first time in history (Kang 2020).

In January 2020, the United States' leading chemist and chair of the Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology at Harvard University was arrested and charged with lying to federal investigators about connections to the People's Republic of China. Dr. Charles Lieber lied about his position as a "Strategic Scientist" at the Wuhan University of Technology (WUT) in China and his participation in the Chinese "Thousand Talents Program." The Thousand Talents Program offers top positions at Chinese universities, national recognition, and large sums of money to individuals if they leave their current positions. The program was created by the Chinese government to lure top international scientists and engineers to Chinese universities in order to further technological innovation and industry. However, United States intelligence

experts, along with those from Canada and Europe, assert that the Chinese Thousand Talents Program also functions as a method of espionage.

Dr. Charles Lieber's motivations are not certain, but the financial gains he received were very likely a significant contributor. It is certain, however, that Lieber directly received over \$200,000 per month from WUT and \$1.5 million dollars in funding for his research lab at WUT. This monetary gain was tied to his three-year Thousand Talents contract that he signed. Because of this position, he was expected to fabricate international research co-operation opportunities and to publish articles for WUT. The co-operation required of Dr. Lieber was likely used to expose information and research otherwise unavailable to Chinese scientists and further China's technology, defense, and economic interests.

Chinese theft of technologies, research, and sensitive information is a top security concern for the United States. According to the Director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, the annual estimated cost of Chinese theft of American trade secrets is "anywhere from \$300billion to \$600billion" dollars (Reuters 2020). Numerous agencies, including the FBI, have identified this type of espionage as a top threat now and in the future for the United States. Thus, identifying the methods and motivations of this espionage is critical to understanding and preventing it. One of the most important phenomena to understand is the individual motivations to engage in this type of espionage on behalf of the People's Republic of China. How and why individuals participate will be explored in this work. Understanding this important component of the espionage will help further the discussion about this method of Chinese espionage.

### **Chinese Espionage Using Academics**

China relies heavily on civilian academics to conduct espionage. The Chinese Thousand Talents Program, as introduced and explained, is a prime example of this. It is promoted by the Chinese as a scientific recruiting tool, but intelligence agencies recognize it also operates as a method of stealing research, information, and technology that would otherwise be inaccessible to Chinese academics. The main method used by the Chinese to acquire technology is with scholarly exchange programs. It is estimated that 15,000 Chinese students arrive to the United States annually (Eftimiades 2014). As a result of this, the United States revoked 1,000 Chinese student and researcher visas in September of 2020 (O'Malley 2020).

To recruit these students and researchers, China targets their efforts in a few different ways. According to Nicholas Eftimiades (2014, p. 16), "the process of obtaining intelligence related information through scientific...delegations is a common form of low-level espionage." Intelligence officers embedded in scientific delegations serve two purposes. The first is to identify personnel with access and potential to be recruited and the second is to collect information on facilities and research programs. Collecting this type of information is critical to the recruitment of researchers and therefore the collection of beneficial intelligence and technologies. This method involves recruiting researchers already in the U.S., but China also targets students and researchers in China who can steal the technology while in the United States.

China targets students and researchers to obtain very specific intelligence and technologies. The PRC are seeking information and research on U.S. Technologies and research specifically related to defense. The academics and the research they target relates specifically to the technologies required to advance the capabilities of the PLA (O'Malley 2020). "Nearly half of Chinese espionage efforts target U.S. military and space technologies," (Eftimiades 2019, p.

126). Thus, it is clear that at least one of their primary objectives is to gain advantages in defense technologies. The revocation of visas in September 2020 was targeted at Chinese academics working on technologies that would further this objective of the People's Republic of China.

China's use of individual academics is their primary method of intelligence collection related to intellectual property. This is one of the most effective methods, but they engage in the practice for other reasons as well, including economic reliance, access to human resources, and efficiency. According to Nicholas Eftimiades (2014), China's economy will be increasingly reliant on the theft of intellectual property. "The combination of a stagnant economy and an increasingly competitive global economic environment will force China to rely more heavily on [stealing intellectual property]...for modernization," (Eftimiades 2014, p.126). In addition, it is estimated that roughly 350,000 students and researchers study in the United States each year (Cohen and Marquardt 2019) and the large ethnic Chinese community in the United States serves as another advantage. Instead of recruiting career intelligence officers, China relies on recruiting citizens, with no intelligence collection or espionage experience, who travel and conduct research with a legitimate purpose (Eftimiades 2019).

This methodology provides significant benefit to the Chinese and also speaks to individual motivations. The Chinese approach is sometimes called the "thousand grains of sand" approach, alluding to their use of "large numbers of amateur collectors,"(Munoz, p.33). It allows China to take advantage of individuals with high technical ability and field knowledge, something intelligence officers often do not have. Few individuals who engage in this type of espionage are actually charged with espionage. The use of citizens to collect intelligence, often as a secondary objective to another legitimate one, makes it difficult for the United States to identify and prosecute separate low-level instances of theft as espionage (Eftimiades 2014).



Thus, it is lower risk for the individuals compared to a career intelligence officer with the primary objective of espionage. The practice is low-risk, high-reward for both the Chinese and the individuals engaging in it.

According to Hannas et al. (2013), the Chinese target ethnically Chinese scholars overseas to conduct espionage on behalf of the People's Republic of China. Yun and Lin (2001) support this claim with the explanation that "...overseas Chinese scholars and ethnic Chinese specialists[']... hearts belong to their families and country" (Hannas et al. 2013, p.166). The motivations of these individuals to engage in espionage are built on the foundation of nationalism (Hannas et al. 2013). However, this foundation requires a more individualized effort and approach to recruit and convince them (Hannas et al. 2013). Individual motivations to engage in espionage activities are varied, but four categories of motivation for espionage exist: money, ideology, coercion, and ego (Charney et al. 2016).

## **Hypothesis and Methods**

In this work, the central research question is why individuals will engage in intellectual property theft on behalf of the People's Republic of China. The research mentioned supports, in the case of overseas ethnically Chinese academics, a core sense of nationalism and a more direct motivator can explain an individual's motivations to engage in espionage. A qualitative analysis of case studies will be used to examine these direct motivations.

The independent variable is the motivation of the individual.

The dependent variable is if the individual will engage in espionage.

The four motivations of espionage- money, ideology, coercion, and ego- are general psychological and social factors that contribute to individuals' behavior. In the context of espionage, money is defined as "selfish motivation...for wealth or material gain" (Charney et al. 2016, p.72), including both the desire for outright gain and the desire to escape financial hardship. This often presents as an individual deciding espionage is the "best or only way" (Charney et al. 2016, p.72) to attain such wealth. Ideology is defined as "a shared self of beliefs about how the world is or ought to be,"(Charney et al. 2016, p.72), and includes direct motivation to complete the espionage or to rationalize the espionage. Coercion is where the individual does not act "of his or her own free will but, rather, is effectively forced to commit espionage through fear of punishment, exposure of wrongdoing, or some other undesirable outcome," (Charney et al. 2016, p.73). Ego is a much broader category than the rest, because it can cover so many motives. (Charney et al. 2016). However, a more specific definition from Charney et al. (2016,pg.73) includes "desire for challenge, adventure, and excitement", "narcissism", and behaviors to enhance or defend the individual's image.

These four variables largely describe the reasons that individuals will engage in espionage. Espionage is defined, for the purpose of this work, as “knowingly and willfully communicating, furnishing, transmitting, or otherwise making any classified information available to an unauthorized person, or publishing, or using it in any manner prejudicial to the safety or interest of the United States or for the benefit of any foreign government to the detriment of the United States,” 18 U.S.C. § 798 (2012). Fischer (2000) found that money was the most frequent motivator for espionage identified by both volunteer spies and intelligence, or recruited, career officers. Fischer (2000) also found that there was often more than one motivation.

In order to answer the central question, what motivates academics steal intellectual property for the People’s Republic of China, case studies will be chosen and analyzed to determine individual motivations. A purposive method will be used to choose case studies. They will be included if they can be accessed from the Department of Justice and they fit the following criteria: the individual is an academic (student or researcher), the specific act related to espionage is documented, the act was made possible by their role as an academic, the Department of Justice has published details on the case, the individual has been charged with a crime or found guilty of a crime, the aforementioned crime is espionage or closely related to espionage, and there is sufficient detail to describe the case and make a determination on motivation.

Determination of the individual’s motivation(s) will be identified based on the definitions of money, ideology, coercion, and ego above. A primary motivation will be determined if the details of the case signal a clear motivator and there is an absence of the other three. If a secondary motivation is signaled by the case details and there is a clear absence of the other two,

a determination will be made for a secondary motivator as well. The determination of a primary, and possible secondary motivation, is dependent on the case details available. Any determination is accompanied by an assumption that there may be influential factors that are not available for analysis.

The hypothesis tested in this research, using the independent and dependent variables, will be related to the individual motivations and whether the individual engages in espionage. However, consistent with the case study method and mode of analysis, the research will only include instances where the individual engaged in espionage. Thus, the determination of primary motivation, and a secondary one if applicable, for each case study will be the method of testing each hypothesis.

**Money Hypothesis:** Money is the motivation for an individual to engage in espionage or espionage related activities.

**Ideology Hypothesis:** Ideology is the motivation for an individual to engage in espionage or espionage related activities.

**Coercion Hypothesis:** Coercion is the motivation for an individual to engage in espionage or espionage related activities.

**Ego Hypothesis:** Ego is the motivation for an individual to engage in espionage or espionage related activities.

## Analysis

### Case Study 1: Yanqing Ye

In April 2019, Yanqing Ye was stopped at Logan International Airport after allegedly lying about her status as a student on her J-1 visa application (DOJ Jan. 2020). Yanqing Ye later identified herself as a lieutenant in the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA) and a member of the Chinese Communist Party. From October 2017 to April 2019, Ye studied at Boston University's Department of Physics, Chemistry, and Biomedical Engineering (DOJ Jan. 2020). While claiming she had little contact with two PLA officers and professors at the Chinese National University of Defense Technology (NUDT), a search of her electronic devices found she was working at the direction of one of the professors (DOJ Jan. 2020).

The professor, also serving as a PLA Colonel, directed Ye to access and assess U.S. Military websites and projects, compile the work of two U.S. Scientists which related to robotics and computer science, conduct research, and send other U.S. information and documents back to China (DOJ Jan. 2020). At the direction of the other NUDT professor, she also planned to collaborate on a "research paper about a risk assessment model designed to decipher data for military applications" (DOJ Jan. 2020). It is alleged that she lied about these connections to the PLA and the CCP in addition to her status as a student (DOJ Jan. 2020). Ye is charged with acting as an agent of a foreign government, visa fraud, making false statements, and conspiracy.

From the details of the case, only a primary motive for Yanqing Ye was identified. Her position as a PLA officer and CCP member indicates strong allegiance to the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party. In addition, her primary objective for being in the United States was to operate as a foreign agent and complete assignments for PLA officers. These details signal her primary motivation is ideological. This determination is made with high

confidence. Numerous details show ideological motivations while there is a lack of details indicating any motivation related to money, coercion, or ego.

In Case Study 1, Yanqing Ye, the Ideology Hypothesis was supported.

### Case Study 2: Xiao-Jiang Li

In May 2020, Xiao-Jiang Li, a former professor at Emory University, pleaded guilty to filing a false tax return (DOJ May 2020). In 2011, while a professor at Emory University, Li joined the Chinese Thousand Talents Program (DOJ May 2020). From 2012-2018, Li conducted research on Huntington's disease and shared the research with two other Universities in China as part of the Thousand Talents Program (DOJ May 2020). Li held two other professorships at both the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Jinan University, the same universities where he shared the research (DOJ May 2020). During these six years, Li was paid at least \$500,000 by these Chinese universities (DOJ May 2020).

Xiao-Jiang Li's wrongdoing was brought to light by the National Institute of Health (NIH). After reviewing Li's research grant applications, they became concerned he had failed to disclose foreign research activity (DOJ May 2020). Li had indeed failed to disclose foreign income and affiliations, including his participation in the Thousand Talents Program. Li was then investigated by Emory University and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (DOJ May 2020). This investigation resulted in his sentence of 1 year of probation, order to file tax returns for 2012-2018 to include earned foreign income, and restitution (DOJ May 2020).

From the details of the case, a primary motive for Xiao-Jiang Li was identified. His position as a researcher in the United States for many years before joining the Thousand Talents program is likely an indicator espionage was not his primary objective in the country. This

assertion is based on the patterns related to how China co-opts academics. The financial gains from the Thousand Talents program are significant. Thus, it is determined that Li's primary motivation is money. This determination is made with moderate confidence, supported by some details showing a motivation to gain wealth from the espionage and a lack of details to support another primary motivation. The determination of the primary motive is made with moderate confidence because there are only financial details given on the case, and few others.

In Case Study 2, Xiao-Jiang Li, the Money Hypothesis was supported.

### Case Study 3: Song Guo Zheng

For over 20 years, Song Guo Zheng has completed medical research in the United States. However, in May 2020, The Ohio State University confronted the rheumatology professor about his foreign affiliations with China (DOJ Jul. 2020). Allegedly, he has also been part of China's Thousand Talents Program since 2013 while maintaining his position at The Ohio State University (DOJ Jul. 2020). Zheng allegedly engaged in a "sophisticated scheme to use approximately \$4.1 million in grants from the National Institute of Health" to conduct research to advance Chinese knowledge in the areas of rheumatology and immunology (DOJ Jul. 2020). This research would further the "research goals of the Chinese Communist party" and supplement Chinese technologies (DOJ Jul. 2020). As part of his Thousand Talents contract, he allegedly received \$214,000 as an annual salary, \$1.4million in research funding and a team of researchers at Sun Yat-Set University in China, and an additional \$64,000 from Guilin Medical University (DOJ Jul. 2020). As a result of his plans to commit grant fraud and the undisclosed foreign affiliations, Zheng was placed on paid leave, which was soon changed to unpaid leave, from OSU.

Shortly after he was placed on unpaid leave, he abandoned his position at OSU and was arrested while attempting to fly on charter flights from Columbus to China (DOJ Jul. 2020). Zheng fled when he allegedly learned that OSU was investigating whether he broke federal laws related to research funding and foreign affiliations (DOJ Jul. 2020). When arrested, he was found with “three large bags, one small suitcase and a briefcase containing two laptops, three cellular telephones, several USB drives, several silver bars, expired Chinese passports for his family, deeds for property in China and other items” (DOJ Jul. 2020). Zheng was charged with fraud or bribery concerning programs receiving federal funds and making false statements.

From the details of the case, a primary and secondary motive for Song Guo Zheng were identified. His position as a researcher in the United States for many years before joining the Thousand Talents program is likely an indicator espionage was not his primary objective in the country. This assertion is based on the patterns related to how China co-opts academics. The financial gains from the Thousand Talents contract are significant, supporting the determination that Zheng’s primary motivation is money. This determination is made with details to support a motivation to gain wealth with espionage, and a lack of details to support another motivation as the primary one.

In addition, sufficient evidence exists to make the determination of a secondary motivation. Zheng’s research funding, team, and potential to contribute to the Chinese research on rheumatology and immunology cannot be ignored. These offerings made in the Thousand Talents contract and related case details are significant and likely indicate that ego was a factor in his motivation.

However, these determinations are only made with moderate confidence. While numerous case details exist to support money as the primary motivation and ego as the secondary



motivation, the belongings found on Zheng raise questions. The expired passports of his family members specifically raise questions of potential coercion and the silver bars and property deeds could signify wealth. While these details raise questions, they do not alter the determinations of motivation. The case details support a primary motivation of money and a secondary motivation of ego.

In Case Study 3, Song Guo Zheng, the Money Hypothesis was supported.

#### Case Study 4: Hao Zhang

In August 2020, Chinese professor Hao Zhang was found guilty of economic espionage, stealing trade secrets, and conspiracy (DOJ Sept. 2020). From 2010-2015, Zhang “conspired to and did steal trade secrets relating to Surface Acoustic Wave (‘SAW’) and Bulk Acoustic Wave (‘BAW’) filters...” (DOJ Sept. 2020). These technologies are often used in cellphones and other devices to filter radio frequencies (DOJ Sept. 2020). Zhang stole the technologies from two companies: Avago and Skyworks (DOJ Sept. 2020).

Zhang used these trade secrets to obtain numerous benefits. First, Zhang began plans to start companies in China to sell manufactured goods using the stolen technologies. Zhang also used the trade secrets, and his other experiences, to obtain a professorship at Tianjin University (TJU) in China in order to share the technologies with others (DOJ Sept. 2020). He sought to create a Micro-Electro-Mechanical Systems lab at the university (DOJ Sept. 2020). He started the businesses in China and shared the information at Tianjin University knowing it would benefit the Chinese government through these entities (DOJ Sept. 2020). In the United States, he obtained patents in his own name using stolen trade secrets from Avago (DOJ Sept. 2020).

From the details of the case, a primary and secondary motive for Hao Zhang was identified. There are numerous benefits from the espionage acts Zhang committed, including his companies in China, professorship at Tianjin University, and the Chinese and U.S. Patents he obtained. The profits from the companies and patents are highly likely a main focus for Zhang. In addition, his professorship at TJU offers income and a prestigious position and lab. These details show his primary motivation is money, with a secondary motivation of ego. This determination is made with high confidence. Numerous details show motivations related to money, some details show ego motivations, and none indicate any motivation related to ideology or coercion.

In Case Study 4, Hao Zhang, the Money Hypothesis was supported.

#### Case Study 5: Yu Zhou

In April 2021, Yu Zhou was sentenced to nearly three years in prison for conspiring to steal trade secrets and research from Nationwide Children's Hospital (DOJ Apr. 2021). Over the course of ten years, Zhou and his spouse, a co-conspirator, aimed to steal and profit from new lab technologies developed at Nationwide Children's Hospital (DOJ Apr. 2021). With encouragement from the Chinese government, Zhou stole trade secrets from the hospital, created businesses in China to sell the stolen technology, and sought to supplement the research and development of similar projects in China (DOJ Apr. 2021). This encouragement took the form of "benefits" from numerous Chinese government organizations, including entities used transfer technology and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (DOJ Apr. 2021).

From the details of the case, a primary motive for Yu Zhou was identified. His objective was to create the company in China to sell a product using the stolen scientific research. This

objective was also supported by the Chinese government through financial and material gains provided to Zhou. Thus, it is determined with high confidence that Zhou's primary motive is money. This determination is made with details showing a motivation to gain wealth from espionage, and a lack of details to support another primary motivation.

In Case Study 5, Yu Zhou, the Money Hypothesis was supported.

## **Conclusion**

The case studies show that academics who complete espionage on behalf the People's Republic of China are nearly always motivated by money. In four case studies, money was identified as the primary motivation for an individual to complete espionage. In two case studies, it was identified as the only discernable motivation. In the other two case studies with money as the primary motivation, ego was identified as a secondary motivator. In the only case study which did not identify money as the primary motivator, the individual was motivated by ideology.

However, the patterns of Chinese espionage using academics do not support this case study as generalizable. Yanqing Ye was an officer in the PLA and a member of the CCP before becoming a student researcher in the United States. As supported by research, China usually co-opts students and researchers to steal technology as a secondary objective to their primary purpose in the United States. However, Ye's espionage more closely resembles traditional methods of espionage rather than how China usually recruits academics. Although a useful case study, this is an outlier.

In general, the academics who engaged in espionage for China did so in order to gain wealth or material. The Money Hypothesis is supported by the analysis of five case studies. In addition, some merit can be given to the Ego Hypothesis. The Ideology Hypothesis, while supported by one case study, is not indicative of a pattern. None of the five case studies supported coercion as a motivator.

The potential does exist for individuals to be motivated by coercion or ideology. As it was mentioned before, the fundamental patriotism felt by ethnic Chinese and the desire to improve their country does likely make them more willing to participate. However, without

individual interviews with deep questioning, it is impossible to know exactly why these individuals engaged in espionage. In future research, it would be useful to explore the question with these types of individual interviews in order to truly understand the psychology and true motivators for these individuals.

The intelligence community is aware of the threat China poses with this type of intellectual property espionage. "We assess that China's intelligence services will exploit the openness of American society, especially academia and the scientific community, using a variety of means," says the intelligence community's World Wide Threat Assessment (Cohen and Marquardt 2019). In recent Presidential administrations, the threat has been addressed more seriously. This led to the revocation of Chinese student visas and increasing attention from both intelligence agencies and elected officials. This work, a qualitative analysis using Department of Justice sources, determined that money is the most prevalent motivator for academics to engage in activities related to espionage on behalf of the People's Republic of China. Addressing and reducing this type of Chinese espionage is a goal for many government agencies, including the FBI. Perhaps reducing this type of threat from academics can be addressed by focusing on the financial gains sought by individuals. Effective mitigation strategies will be critical to the continued growth and stability of the U.S. economy, commerce, national security, and technology development.

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