

The Cost of Complacency: Texas A&M's Failure to Guard Federally Funded Research

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The abrupt departure of a high-profile, federally funded professor from Texas A&M University this fall should not be treated as a simple personnel matter. When **Dr. Lei Fang**, a Deputy Chemistry Chair, resigned his U.S. post to take a leadership role at the multi-billion-dollar Yongjiang Laboratory (YLAB) in China, he took more than just his personal expertise. The two critical questions for every taxpayer in Texas are this: **Did any valuable, American-funded research walk out the door with him, and how did Texas A&M not spot the early warning signals that point to foreign influence risks?**

The loss of a decorated faculty member is one thing; the loss of taxpayer-funded intellectual property is a matter of national security and institutional compliance. Dr. Fang was not just a professor; he was a recipient of prestigious, sensitive federal grants, including the National Science Foundation's (NSF) CAREER Award and significant funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH)—grants that were active up to or beyond his 2025 departure.

This is the core of the issue: Dr. Fang had a clear, documented pattern of foreign engagement that should have triggered immediate scrutiny and mitigation measures by the university's research security and compliance offices years ago. His own Curriculum Vitae, a public document, listed a "Flexible Joint Visiting Professor" position at Nanchang Hangkong University's Key Laboratory of Jiangxi Province (EDRPCLAB) from 2018 to 2021, *concurrently* with his U.S. federal funding obligations. For context, this Chinese lab has been known to engage in national defense research.

Furthermore, his history shows a stunning conflict of interest: Dr. Fang co-founded Ningbo Kunpeng Environmental Sci-Tech Co., Ltd., in 2017, and subsequently licensed a Texas A&M-owned U.S. patent (US 10,584,201 B2) to that same Chinese company. This not only raises questions about the proprietary nature of the research but also about whether his primary commitment was to the American taxpayer who funded the underlying science, or to his foreign commercial and academic partners.

Adding to the conflicts, Dr. Fang served as a technical reviewer for U.S. research proposals and was a panelist for the prestigious National Defense Science and Engineering Graduate Fellowship (NDSEG). This role gave him privileged, non-public access to the cutting-edge research of competing scientists across the United States—sensitive information that he carried with him as he transitioned to a strategic leadership position at China's YLAB.

This isn't just about sloppy paperwork; it's about a systemic, institutional failure to apply required research security standards. Federal mandates like National Security Presidential

Memorandum-33 (NSPM-33), the CHIPS and Science Act, and the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), along with guidance from NIST IR-8484, require universities to proactively monitor and mitigate these exact foreign influence "red flags." These rules exist to protect federally funded research from theft, misuse, and misappropriation by foreign entities seeking a strategic advantage.

Texas A&M University, a recipient of billions in federal research dollars, had ample public evidence that Dr. Fang's foreign commitments were escalating over time. A main root cause for the university missing the queues may be lack of monitoring and investigating the foreign collaborations of researchers working on basic research projects funded by U.S. taxpayers. Instead, large universities, like Texas A&M University, tend to focus their security attention on their classified research projects, leaving the unclassified research projects to be picked off by Chinese threat actors.

The danger is that Dr. Fang's case is merely the one that broke into the public domain. How many more federally funded basic research scenarios are quietly unfolding across the vast Texas A&M System, where faculty members are balancing U.S. taxpayer-funded roles with strategic, concurrent foreign appointments?