



The Harbin Institute of Technology on the Chinese mainland.

# TAIWAN FINES SCIENTIST FOR ALLEGED PROJECTS ON CHINESE MAINLAND

The contested allegations highlight how political tensions could be affecting research.

Taiwan's education ministry has fined prominent chemical engineer Lee Duu-Jong for allegedly managing research projects funded by the Chinese mainland without approval from the island's authorities. But Lee says that he was not involved in the projects and was listed as the person in charge without his knowledge. The fine, which China's central government has criticized as politically motivated, could affect how other researchers approach collaborations between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland.

Lee is considering appealing against the fine of 300,000 Taiwan dollars (US\$11,000). A researcher who was involved in the projects backs up Lee's account.

Scientists in Taiwan frequently collaborate with colleagues on the Chinese mainland – but participating in large mainland research programmes without permission is against the island's laws. In 2018, Taiwan's science and education ministries sent out letters reminding researchers about the rule – a move understood to reflect growing concerns that the island might be losing talent and intellectual property to the mainland. Lee, who studies wastewater treatment at the National Taiwan University in Taipei and was in the running to

become president of another major university in Taiwan last year, is the first researcher whom the education ministry has fined.

The decision to fine Lee is probably an example of political tensions affecting research, says Hsu Yun-Hsiang, who studies science policy at National Central University in Taoyuan.

**“Clearly, the case would have a ripple effect on the research community.”**

The ruling is intended to send a message to the research community that Taiwan's government can classify research activities as political whenever it wishes, he says.

Hsu says the case could lead to a drop in partnerships if researchers fear they could be penalized. “Clearly, it would have a ripple effect on the research community,” he says.

In a brief fine notice on its website, Taiwan's education ministry alleges that Lee has applied for funding from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) through the Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT) for three projects since 2009. The notice does

not provide information about the projects, but the ministry told *Nature* that, in total, they were worth 1.65 million yuan (US\$255,000). On NSFC project documents that *Nature* found online, Lee is listed as the person responsible for three HIT engineering projects concerning thermophysics and energy utilization.

Lee, however, says he has never applied for, or received, funding from the NSFC, and has never been employed at HIT. He told *Nature* that he has visited the institute for academic conferences and seminars in the past, and has met graduate students and researchers and given them feedback and edited their work, sometimes resulting in him being listed as a co-author on papers.

Lee says he first learnt that he had been named on NSFC projects when the education ministry contacted him in September. He says that a HIT researcher then told Lee that they had applied for the NSFC grants in question, in his name. Lee declined to name the researcher for fear that it would damage their career.

Lee says the researcher gave him a statement, which he passed on to the ministry.

Chen Chuan, director of HIT's Department of Environmental Science, worked on the three NSFC projects. He says that Lee provided guidance on them, but was not involved in applying for funding or in executing the work.

Although the education-ministry notice says Lee was fined over three projects, Lee says that he has been fined for his alleged involvement in only one, which ran from 2016 to 2019. He says he has never seen the specific NSFC records viewed by *Nature*, although he confirms that the projects mentioned in them matched the ones that the ministry contacted him about.

The ministry told *Nature* in an e-mail that it had conducted an investigation after receiving reports that Lee had applied for the projects without permission from Taiwan's authorities. Participating in NSFC activities has required such approval since 2004, it said. The ministry did not respond to questions about Lee's account of events.

## Flow-on effect

Yang Hung-Duen, a physicist at National Sun Yat-sen University in Kaohsiung who was head of Taiwan's science ministry from 2016 to 2017, thinks that in light of Lee's case, researchers will probably become more diligent about reporting their collaborations with researchers on the Chinese mainland.

China's central government criticized the fine. At a press briefing on 24 February, Ma Xiaoguang, spokesperson for the Taiwan Affairs Office of China's State Council, described it as politically motivated and said the island's authorities are increasingly disrupting normal exchanges concerning science and technology. Taiwan's education ministry did not comment on these remarks in its response to *Nature*.

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