

## News in focus

endangered North China leopards (*Panthera pardus orientalis*). But he had to cancel the trips because of the Omicron outbreak. “For us, missing out on a season’s data is like losing a year of data,” he says. Wang hopes to do the field trips later this year.

Without access to his university campus, Wang and his team can’t analyse animal samples collected previously. Wang says the impact is manageable for him, but he worries about his students, whose dissertations rely on the data from such analyses.

“Over the past two years, our students have been under tremendous pressure and faced great uncertainty about their future. As a teacher, I worry such uncertainty will make my students prioritize stability over what they actually want to pursue when choosing a career,” he says.

With Shanghai at a standstill, Wang also found himself overwhelmed by fresh responsibilities. Besides conducting research and mentoring his students, he needs to take care of his young child, who is also cooped up at home, and help with cooking. He must look for ways to get groceries, which are difficult to find because the city’s entire population is relying on a limited number of delivery workers to bring necessities to their doors. “I feel really tired and stretched thin,” he says.

### 3,000 steps a day, at home

Before the lockdown, Jiahong Wen, a natural-disasters modeller at Shanghai Normal University, had planned to conduct field research in Linhai, a nearby city that was hit by a catastrophic typhoon in 2019. But Wen had to abandon his trip when the government announced that people in Shanghai could not leave home.

Wen can do most of his other work on his laptop at home. To keep fit, he’s been exercising, including lifting weights. Sometimes he just walks around his apartment. “Every day I walk about 3,000 steps just by circling my home dozens of times. I also told my students to do so, to keep them healthy,” he says.

In 2020, Wen worked on modelling the pandemic. Considering the size of Shanghai’s current outbreak and the city’s strict restrictions, he thinks COVID-19 cases will start to fall and that the city will return to normal as early as May. But he’s concerned for his daughter, who is supposed to be sitting China’s extremely competitive university entrance exam in June. “Omicron seems to be very stealthy and cases have been popping up unexpectedly. I don’t want anything to happen to my daughter that would affect her exam.”

### Travel restrictions

“I consider myself extremely lucky, since our institute’s administration and logistic staff on site have been trying their best to keep us safe and fed,” says Xian Shi, an astronomer at the

Shanghai Astronomical Observatory who lives on campus in central Shanghai. The lockdown hasn’t had a huge impact on her research – she studies small objects, such as asteroids, in the Solar System – because she’s been working from home for the past two years of the pandemic. But Shi had to cancel a long-planned trip to give a talk and meet her collaborators in a nearby city.

**“Although the lockdown is a misfortune for the city, for us sociologists, it’s a huge social experiment.”**

“I expected that the lockdown probably would not end as planned, given the highly infectious variant and stringent criteria for opening up,” she says. As a result, she took her laptops and hard drives, as well as a lot of coffee, back to her home ahead of time.

Shi worries that China’s strict travel restrictions will make it more difficult to attend international conferences and meet colleagues in other parts of the world.

To Jia Miao, a sociologist at New York University Shanghai, the current lockdown is

like witnessing the focus of her past research unfolding in front of her. She studied community resilience during the 2020 city-wide lockdown of Wuhan, China, where SARS-CoV-2 was first detected. Now, she’s experiencing a lockdown at first hand, which has given her ideas for future research. “Although the lockdown is a misfortune for the city, for us sociologists, it’s a huge social experiment. It will give us lots of opportunities to study a variety of issues that arise.”

Her university gave staff and students a day’s notice before shutting down, so Miao had time to gather her laptop and assemble the data she needed to work from home. “Personally, I’m doing okay.” But the lockdown has forced her to postpone field trips, both for her own research and for the undergraduate classes she teaches. “I do hope there could be one last chance before the end of the term to take my students on a field trip.”

Miao teaches an urban sociology class that discusses topics such as the role of community in a pandemic. “After this outbreak, my students will have a fresh perspective when looking at communities, and they can bring their personal experience and insights to the class,” she says.

## US CHEMICAL ENGINEER FOUND GUILTY OF HIDING TIES TO CHINA

A jury convicted Feng ‘Franklin’ Tao on four of eight charges – but a judge is reviewing the case.

By Sara Reardon

University of Kansas (KU) chemical engineer Feng ‘Franklin’ Tao, who was accused of hiding ties to a Chinese university, has been found guilty of wire fraud and making false statements to the US government. On 7 April, a jury for the US district court of Kansas found that Tao, currently on unpaid leave from KU in Lawrence, had committed research-grant fraud by failing to tell his employer and federal funding agencies about an alleged faculty appointment in China.

The closely watched case is the latest prosecution of a scientist arrested under the China Initiative – a controversial US programme launched in 2018 by former president Donald Trump’s administration to protect US institutions from economic espionage. On the basis of an internal investigation, the US Department of Justice (DoJ) announced in February

that it was discontinuing the programme after accusations that the initiative was racially biased. The DoJ said it didn’t find evidence of radical prejudice, but acknowledged that the initiative could have been perceived as fuelling a narrative of intolerance.

In a statement sent to *Nature*, Tao’s attorney, Peter Zeidenberg, says that he hopes the verdict will be overturned. He notes that the judge has ordered a briefing on the government’s evidence and whether anyone was actually defrauded, and that she did not set a sentencing date. “While we are deeply disappointed with the jury’s verdict, we believe it was so clearly against the weight of the evidence we are convinced that it will not stand,” Zeidenberg writes.

A press release from the DoJ says that Tao could face decades in federal prison and a fine of up to US\$250,000 for each offence.

Tao, who was first arrested in 2019, is thought to be the first scientist to have been charged



Franklin Tao's trial was held at the Robert J. Dole Federal Courthouse in Kansas City.

under the China Initiative. DoJ prosecutors say he planned to defraud KU and US federal agencies by accepting a position at Fuzhou University in China. They say Tao failed to report the alleged employment to the US Department of Energy and the US National Science Foundation, which funded his research at KU.

The prosecution's primary evidence included unsigned contracts from Fuzhou University that the FBI had found in Tao's e-mail account, along with e-mails suggesting that he had attempted to recruit student employees at the Chinese university, and requests for Fuzhou to buy equipment for his laboratory there. Tao has told *The New Yorker* magazine that he had considered moving to Fuzhou University, but decided against it.

Tao's defence team argued that the evidence came from an unreliable source: one of Tao's former research associates, Humin Liu. E-mails seemed to show Liu trying to extort Tao for \$300,000 and accusing him of having harmed her career prospects, before reporting him to KU and the FBI for espionage. Liu submitted the accusations under false names and apparently hacked into Tao's e-mail account to acquire the contracts.

### A federal case

Zeidenberg challenged the evidence suggesting that Tao was ever employed at Fuzhou University. The charges, he said, were minor administrative errors that had been blown out of proportion by federal investigators. He said there was no evidence that KU or anyone else was harmed. "Because it involved China, the government has turned it into a federal case," he told the court, according to AP News.

The defence team called only two witnesses: Tao's wife and a pastor. Tao himself never took the stand. The trial lasted for two weeks,

and the jury deliberated for more than a day before returning a verdict. It found Tao guilty of three of six counts of wire fraud and one of two counts of making false statements.

"When I heard the news, I was surprised, I was disappointed and I was confused about what this means for the future," says Jenny Lee, a social scientist at the University of Arizona in Tucson who last year published the results of a survey showing that US scientists of Chinese descent feared being under surveillance after the China Initiative launched (see [go.nature.com/3ecgmrt](https://go.nature.com/3ecgmrt)). "I really anticipated the case would have been dropped a while ago."

Tao is one of dozens of scientists of Chinese heritage to have been indicted for alleged ties to China. A December 2021 analysis by *MIT Technology Review* found that of the 77 known

**"It does not reassure the Chinese American science community that the China Initiative will end."**

China Initiative cases, only 19 involved economic espionage; many of the rest involved corruption or research-integrity issues, such as the proper disclosure of foreign funding on grant applications (see [go.nature.com/3je28ga](https://go.nature.com/3je28ga)). Most of the scientists were acquitted or had the charges against them dropped.

Among them is Gang Chen, a mechanical engineer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge who was arrested in 2021 on similar charges of hiding ties to China. The DoJ dropped Chen's charges in January this year. To Chen, Tao's case suggests that the US government holds scientists of Chinese heritage to a different standard of

research conduct from others. "Most people would not disclose to their employer that they're looking for a new job – that's not a crime," he says.

Chen adds that the government's actions are creating a "chilling effect" on international scientists' and students' willingness to come to the United States. "The US is built on talent. If talent is leaving and not coming, how does that help with national security?" he says. And although MIT welcomed him back after his charges were dropped, Chen says he and his family still live in fear. "You can't get rid of this fear, you fear you're watched every day."

In a 23 February speech, US assistant attorney-general for national security Matthew Olsen said that although the China Initiative would be ending, the US government would continue to investigate espionage and fraud cases under a new plan, called the Strategy for Countering Nation-State Threats. This initiative covers China, as well as several other "hostile" nations, including Iran and Russia. Olsen added that the DoJ will continue to stand behind the cases that it is currently prosecuting.

Critics of the China Initiative say that the decision by President Joe Biden's administration to end the policy should include a re-examination of pending cases, rather than continued prosecution. The decision to pursue Tao's case – and his conviction – is discouraging, Lee says. "It certainly does not reassure the Chinese American science community that the China Initiative in its current form will end, even though they're dropping the label."

### Pending cases

Lee points out that the judge adjudicating Tao's case took steps to distance the case from the China Initiative, banning testimony from either party that would have suggested that Tao was involved with espionage. However, Lee says, by focusing only on Tao's alleged crimes, the DoJ also distanced itself from the accusations of racial bias linked to the initiative, and the actual reasons that Tao was investigated in the first place. A spokesperson for the DoJ declined to comment to *Nature*.

Several other cases are set to go to trial later this year, and the Chinese American academic community will be watching them closely, says Haipei Shue, president of the non-profit organization United Chinese Americans in Washington DC. "We feel very strongly this is country-of-origin profiling," he says.

Shue also worries that the government's goal in treating cases such as Tao's as criminal rather than administrative is to dissuade Chinese espionage rather than punish a crime. He cites a Chinese proverb: "Kill a chicken to scare the monkey. If this is the case, I don't have the words to describe that. It sounds to me very medieval."