



Lingering Specters: Student Visas, Strategic Missteps, and the Cautionary Tale of Qian Xuesen

By: CJ Godkin

CJ Godkin is a Master of International Affairs student at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. His primary interests include diplomacy, grand strategy, and Latin America.

On September 24, 2020, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) proposed changes to the policy framework concerning F, J, and I nonimmigrant visas. These changes would impose a fixed period of stay for different groups including [“academic students”](#) and [“exchange visitors”](#) based on country of origin and citizenship. The reasoning for proposing such changes is to [“encourage program compliance, reduce fraud, and enhance national security.”](#) Though the threat posed by countries exploiting access to American universities is a real one, the claim that these visa changes will substantively enhance national security is undermined when considering similar heavy-handed policies in history. Targeting foreign nationals involved in American higher education and research institutions has proven to be a highly questionable strategy. We need look no further than the case of Qian Xuesen, set during the 1950s against the backdrop of McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare.

Born towards the end of the Qing Empire, Qian Xuesen (later, Hsue-Shen Tsien) first came to the United States in 1935 as an international student. As a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), he was invited by aerodynamicist [Theodore von Kármán](#) to enroll in a doctoral program under his tutelage at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in Pasadena. It was at Caltech where Tsien began his interest in rocketry.

Working with rocketry pioneers like Frank Malina while continuing his education, Xuesen joined the [Guggenheim Aeronautical Laboratory at Caltech \(GALCIT\)](#), conducting experiments that would lead to essential advancements in American rocketry for military use. These include the WAC Corporal – the first sounding rocket in the United States – and what would eventually become the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), one of the preeminent scientific organizations in modern rocketry. However, Xuesen also found himself part of [Unit 122](#), a group largely composed of Caltech scientists and connected to the United States Communist Party.

While evidence indicates Xuesen was a member of Unit 122 – [Liljan Malina, Frank Malina’s first wife](#), recalled seeing him at meetings – nothing indicates these affiliations extended beyond Pasadena. Arguments from former [Under Secretary of the Navy Dan Kimball](#) to officials overseeing Xuesen’s case suggest as much. Further, there is ample evidence suggesting he was fond of the United States; he went so far as to [file for American citizenship in 1947](#). Like many of his former Caltech associates, he was swept up by McCarthyism. Initially, this consisted of a revoked security clearance. However, this progressed into attempted espionage charges (later dropped due to a lack of evidence) and a [simultaneous deportation order and house arrest](#).



In 1955, after five years of bureaucratic limbo, Xuesen eventually returned to his home country – at that point the People’s Republic of China – as part of a prisoner exchange. As many had cautioned, he was [swept into the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party](#) (CCP) and proved to be incredibly useful in developing China’s space and missile programs. His contributions helped the country launch its first satellite, develop nuclear weaponry, and achieve the fastest fission-to-fusion development in history. Most ironically, Xuesen’s efforts led to the creation of the Haiying anti-ship missiles – [known as “Silkworms” in the West](#) – infamously used against United States naval forces during the First Gulf War.

This chain of events can only be considered a grave mistake in the execution of American foreign policy. Through his contributions to rocketry, Xuesen provided much to the United States’ national security. It is regrettable, then, to consider his aptitude was not only lost but used to foster a rival’s capabilities. While it can be argued China would have achieved these feats regardless, it is hard to overlook the role Xuesen played in the establishment and rapid development of its missile, nuclear, and space programs. It is equally hard to overlook, then, that were it not for heavy-handed policies justified in the name of national security, these programs would look substantially different than they do today. There is a dearth of evidence suggesting any espionage by Xuesen [actually occurred](#). Rather, it was the matter of having the wrong affiliations – sentiments echoed in the recent DHS proposal – that drove Xuesen out of the United States and caused the country to shoot itself in its proverbial foot. In the face of national security threats, it is imperative the current administration does not make the same strategic missteps as its predecessors. Instead, it should embrace international students not only as recipients of but contributors to the American education system and, through their research, the country as a whole.