

Chinese police have detained a US automotive engineer since November last year on accusations he misused trade secrets — the latest case of vague secrecy laws being used against an American in China.

Hu Zhicheng (胡志诚), a prize-winning designer of industrial catalysts to control auto emissions, has had letters from his family censored and has been denied reading materials during his detention in Tianjin, the US embassy in Beijing said. Last week police rejected an Old Testament he asked US consular officers to bring him.

The stern treatment is being meted out in a business dispute over an automobile technology. Hu told US officials that investigators have threatened him with multimillion-dollar fines unless he gives the rights to his US-registered patent to a former business partner in Tianjin.

Hu's wife, Li Hong, a China-born naturalized American like her husband, said Tianjin authorities' real target is a China-based company she managed and whose cutting-edge products competed with those of the former business partner, the Hysci (Tianjin) Specialty Materials Co.

Hysci, she said, complained that her startup was developing products unusually fast, prompting the trade secrets investigation.

"You don't sue someone just because you think their R&D is too fast," said Li, who lives in the Los Angeles area with their two teenage children. "This case is being conducted illegally."

The US embassy said prosecutors have twice sent the case back to police for further investigation — often a sign the evidence is insufficient for an indictment.

Hysci declined to comment, as did the Chinese company that employed Hu at the time of his detention. Prosecutors referred inquiries to the Tianjin police. The police information office said the criminal investigation is continuing but refused to elaborate other than to say "it is a complicated case."

A holder of nine patents in the US, Hu is just the kind of emigre Beijing has been eager to lure back to bolster an economy growing rapidly but short of talented managers and innovators. He has done research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as well as for multinationals in the US and Japan.

Yet, Hu's predicament shows how powerful vested interests marshal law enforcement agencies to pressure foreign business executives, especially those like Hu, who were once Chinese citizens but now hold foreign passports.

Hu's detention comes amid other similar prosecutions of China-born foreign nationals. In recent months, Australian national Stern Hu (胡士能) — an executive with the global mining giant Rio Tinto — was detained on state secrets charges that were later reduced to infringing trade

China holds US engineer in ‘trade secrets’ case

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secrets.

Another China-born, naturalized American, geologist Xue Feng (薛峰), disappeared into custody two years ago and has been put on trial for passing on state secrets — for arranging the purchase of a detailed commercial database on the Chinese oil and gas industry.

All three cases involve industries Beijing deems vital to China’s economic security.

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