

Demand the dropping of charges against Chinese University of Michigan graduate researchers!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality
8 June 2025

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls on workers, students and youth across the United States and internationally to oppose the warmongering witch-hunting of Chinese researchers Yunqing Jian and Zunyong Liu.

Jian, a University of Michigan postdoctoral biology fellow, was arrested on June 2 and taken over 130 miles from her home in Ann Arbor to Sanilac County Jail, where she is currently being detained.

On June 3, a US district court in Detroit unsealed a criminal complaint and affidavit on an investigation led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) into the research of the two Chinese post-doctoral students working at the University of Michigan (U-M).

The Department of Justice (DOJ) charges that the pair conspired to smuggle in *fusarium graminearum*, a fungus found around the world in temperate regions and historically associated with head blight in several types of crops, capable of causing grain reductions and plant infections. The director of the FBI, Kash Patel, posted in a statement that the students were caught “smuggling a known agroterrorism agent into the US” and claimed that the FBI had stopped “a biological threat before it could do real damage.”

Most bourgeois press news reports are uncritically repeating the FBI affidavit statement that “*Fusarium graminearum* is responsible for billions of dollars in economic losses worldwide each year.” The unstated implication is that the researchers were intending to sabotage the US grain and crop supply chain.

The FBI allegations against Jian and Liu have all the hallmarks of a frame-up. The DOJ-FBI statements about “agroterrorism” turn reality on its head, resting on a network of poorly or entirely unsupported allegations.

Jian is a Research Fellow in the Shan Lab in the Department of Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology (MCDB) at the University of Michigan. She received her doctoral degree in plant pathogens from Zhejiang University and has been at U-M for over two years, publishing or co-authoring over a dozen peer-reviewed papers on the subject in that time.

Liu, the boyfriend of Jian, is also a postdoctoral fellow from Zhejiang University studying plant pathogens. Both Jian and Liu have been publishing studies in scholarly journals on plant pathogens since as early as 2014.

The criminal complaint originally stems from July 2024, when Liu was stopped at Detroit Wayne International Airport by CBP agents because he had traveled with four small pouches of *fusarium graminearum* in his luggage. Liu initially denied they were his but

subsequently admitted that he had attempted to hide the samples in his bag to avoid difficult import restrictions. He said he was intending to bring them to the Shan Lab to study with Jian at U-M. As reported in the affidavit, CBP seized Liu’s electronic devices, denied him legal entry to the US and expedited his removal back to China.

Then, seven months later, in February of 2025, after the Trump administration had come to power, the FBI approached Jian at U-M. Jian initially denied any knowledge of Liu’s plans, but after her phone and electronic devices were confiscated, the agents found text messages in which both had communicated innocuous messages about the incident.

Nearly four months later, on June 3, 2025, the FBI arrested Jian and charged both researchers with conspiracy, smuggling goods into the United States, false statements and visa fraud. A detention hearing is set for Jian on June 13 in Detroit. Most of the four charges traditionally carry up to 20 years in prison.

In a press release, the prosecuting DOJ attorney, Jerome Gorgon, reflecting the anti-Chinese racism and red-baiting intentions of the Trump administration, claimed:

These two aliens have been charged with smuggling a fungus that has been described as a “potential agroterrorism weapon” into the heartland of America. [T]he alleged actions of these Chinese nationals — including a loyal member of the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] — are of the gravest national security concerns.

The claim that Jian is a “loyal CCP member” implies that she is part of a secretive network of Chinese spies. This is bound up with an “annual self-assessment form” that the FBI found on her laptop, from the Zhejiang University, which is funding her research. The assessment report describes her research accomplishments from the previous year and includes an oath to follow the principles of the CCP.

However, a January 2025 report from the rightwing *Radio Free America* indicates that these “loyalty pledges” are generally well known to governments around the world and are required of all Chinese students who receive full funding from state-run universities to study abroad.

Though the oaths are highly restrictive agreements that, among other things, make funding contingent upon returning to China, the Chinese

government does not conceal their existence, making known, for instance, that 27,000 such scholarships were issued in 2021. One of the “loyalty pledges” in the document is that the recipient must abide by the laws of the country in which he or she is staying.

Nevertheless, these loyalty oath documents will undoubtedly be used as the pretext to escalate witch-hunts against Chinese students in the United States.

Despite the DOJ claims that *fusarium graminearum* can be used for “bioterrorism,” none of the charges in the June 3 affidavit involve accusations of “terrorism” or any intent to distribute the pathogens. This is because every indication is that Jian and Liu were taking part in scientific research.

Several US agronomists and biologists have publicly questioned the scientific claims of the FBI and DOJ. Caitilyn Allen, professor emeritus of plant pathology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told Detroit-area news outlets that she had never heard anyone in the scientific community characterize *fusarium graminearum* as a “terrorism agent,” and that it is not on any list of high-concern plant pathogens or potential “agrorterrorism” agents.

Allen said:

It’s actually a very common and widespread fungus that attacks mostly wheat and barley. It’s found in, I think, 32 American states. So we are not talking about something that’s been introduced by China. People should not be freaking out. It’s already here, but it is a problem for farmers. It can reduce yield significantly.”

Jan Leach, a plant pathologist at Colorado State University, told *Chemistry World* that while not obtaining a permit to bring the fungus into the US showed a “lack of good judgement,” it is not on any plant pathogen watch list and thus the two researchers may not have been aware that they were required to gain such authorization.

Most significant is the timing of the arrest of Jian, which came just days after US Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s May 28 announcement that the US government was going to “aggressively revoke visas” for Chinese international students in America. Referencing the filthy history of anti-Chinese chauvinism in the US, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 through the COVID-19 Wuhan lab lie and “Chinese flu” propaganda, the *World Socialist Web Site* commented on the announcement:

The State Department and Department of Homeland Security are preparing to initiate a massive witch-hunt against Chinese students. Students will be accused of spying for China on the basis of their ethnic origin. Such a campaign will invariably take on an anti-communist character like the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the Red Scare in the 1950s.

This witch-hunt is now underway, as part of the multi-pronged effort to prepare for US imperialist war with China and establish dictatorial rule inside the US. The attack on Jian and Liu is an escalation of the ongoing attacks on international students, including the Trump administration’s move to strip Harvard University of its ability to enroll international students, the kidnapping and deportation of

students who publicly oppose Israel’s genocide of Palestinians, and the nationwide effort to pressure academic institutions to end research partnerships with Chinese universities.

Last week, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth spoke at the top-level Shangri-La Dialogue, where he suggested that US war with China was “imminent” and demanded that Washington’s Indo-Pacific allies dramatically increase their military spending in preparation. The US war drive against China is part of a long-standing bipartisan campaign that was elevated by Democratic President Barack Obama in 2011 under his “Pivot to Asia” policy, aimed at undercutting Chinese diplomatic influence in the region, undermining its economy, and preparing for war.

The attack on Jian and Liu must be opposed by all workers and students, including their colleagues in the sciences and graduate programs, at U-M and around the world. Opposition to these attacks cannot be left to organizations in and around the Democratic Party, including the trade union bureaucracies and the Democratic Socialists of America. The Democratic Party does not oppose this witch-hunting and is, in fact, facilitating Trump’s fascist policies.

None of the leaders of the half-dozen unions at U-M organized under the Democratic Party-affiliated American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has thus far issued any public denunciation of these attacks. Nor has the postdoctoral fellows union, the University of Michigan Postdoctoral Researchers’ Organization (UM-PRO), made any public statement in defense of Jian. UM-PRO is currently negotiating with the university to become an officially recognized union, and claims that it already represents over half of the campus’ 1,500 postdoctoral fellows.

For its part, the U-M Public Affairs office issued a craven statement in which it completely disconnected the institution from Liu and Jian and made clear that it would “continue to cooperate with federal law enforcement.” The university is giving a rubber stamp to this frame-up, leaving its more than 4,000 Chinese students vulnerable to further witch-hunting. The *Michigan Daily* newspaper issued an obsequious report about the arrest that presented all the allegations as legitimate.

The opposition to these arrests must be mobilized within the working class at U-M—off-campus, around the country, and internationally. The IYSSE calls on scientists and colleagues to speak out on Jian’s behalf and to denounce the fraudulent anti-scientific and racist pretext on which the state is attacking her and other Chinese students. Workers and students must insist that these charges be dropped and that the defense of Chinese students be combined with a broader defense of democratic rights and opposition to the US war drive against China and Russia.



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