Another University of Michigan researcher arrested as Justice Department escalates anti-China campaign

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On June 8, Chengxuan Han, a PhD student from Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, was arrested at Detroit Metropolitan Airport and charged with smuggling and making false statements to federal officials. She is being held in federal custody without bond at the Sanilac County Jail and faces the threat of up to 20 years in prison. The case of is a textbook example of a political frame-up.

Stripped of the xenophobic rhetoric of the Department of Justice (DOJ), the core allegation is that Han mailed four packages from China to associates at a University of Michigan (U-M) lab containing common, non-hazardous biological research materials—specifically, roundworms and plasmids on filter paper—without the proper permits. The charges do not relate to anything she carried on her person or in her luggage.

Just days before Han's arrest, the DOJ charged U-M postdoctoral fellow Yunqing Jian and her partner, Zunyong Liu, with conspiring to import the fungus Fusarium graminearum, which the DOJ's press release sensationally branded a "potential agroterrorism weapon." This fungus is a common plant pathogen already prevalent across the United States, and agricultural experts have noted that its use for widespread infection is highly unlikely.

The real issue, once again, is a customs violation, not a plot to destroy American agriculture. Jian is also being held in Sanilac under federal custody without bond. The timing of Jian's arrest, nearly a year after Liu was denied entry into the US, suggests it was politically motivated to coincide with other cases in the anti-China campaign.

These DOJ actions follow Secretary of State Marco Rubio's May 28 threat to "aggressively revoke visas" for Chinese international students. Approximately 270,000 Chinese students nationwide and 4,000 at U-M are under threat of deportation.

The two "smuggling" cases are being linked to that of Haoxiang Gao, a U-M student charged in October 2024 with the rare offense of illegally voting as a non-citizen. The DOJ press release dripped with anti-communist venom, with US Attorney and U-M alumnus Jerome F. Gorgon, Jr. declaring that "illegal voting by a foreign national who is from a country controlled by a communist party dictatorship... is beyond the pale." Gao fled the country January 19 after being released on bond, but the case was only unsealed in May, again suggesting coordination with other anti-China cases.

In Han's case, the entire "national security" narrative collapses upon the slightest scrutiny of the materials involved. Michael Shapira, a biologist at the University of California, Berkeley, told the Associated Press, "It doesn't strike me as something that is dangerous in any way. But there are rules to ship biological material."

Indeed, there are rules, but the practice of avoiding these cumbersome and bureaucratic regulations for non-hazardous materials is widespread in the international scientific community. Researchers frequently use informal methods to share common samples like plasmids to avoid delays that can cripple a research project. It is highly probable that Han, like countless other junior researchers, was simply following common laboratory practice, possibly at the instruction of her supervisors.

While Han's skirting of import restrictions may have been against the rules and potentially unethical, Han's prosecution is politically motivated. This is clear from the language used by the state. The DOJ's press release announcing the charges carried the deliberately provocative headline: "Alien from Wuhan, China, Charged with Making False Statements and Smuggling Biological Materials." The specific inclusion of "Wuhan" is a calculated political act, designed to tap into the reservoir of anti-Asian hatred whipped up by the US political establishment during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and to link Han's case to the baseless "Wuhan lab leak" conspiracy theory.

Gorgon declared the case was "part of an alarming pattern

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that threatens our security." The far-right political apparatus immediately fell in line, with FBI Director Kash Patel tweeting that the arrest was part of a broader crackdown on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) efforts "to undermine America's research institutions."

The state and its media accomplices are deliberately linking Han's case with a series of disparate and unrelated incidents at the University of Michigan to manufacture the perception of a coordinated Chinese plot. This is part of the ideological preparation for war against China.

The FBI has deployed its assets, such as former agent and current U-M lecturer Javed Ali, to tell the media that a "pattern is emerging." A June 11 Mlive interview with Ali, which features a photo of an M777 howitzer artillery piece, links Han and Jian's smuggling arrests to Gao's illegal voting case and an incident from August 2023, when five U-M students were found photographing military vehicles near Camp Grayling in Michigan during a public training exercise that involved Taiwanese military personnel. Despite overblown accusations of spying from right-wing politicians, the state's case was so weak that the students were not charged with espionage.

Ali suggests that these sensationalized cases demonstrate a threat posed by China to the entire US academic community, declaring, "It reinforces the enduring nature of this sort of threat from foreign governments and foreign intelligence services."

To the FBI mouthpiece, this vague "threat" is both urgent and routine. He said, "It's hard to know in at least the most recent cases, but this has been going on for decades." The skirting of import restrictions by scientists has indeed been going on for decades, but the political persecution of scientists has been timed to coincide with the drive for war with China.

These persecutions are a continuation of the policies initiated under the first Trump administration's "China Initiative." Launched in 2018 to supposedly combat economic espionage, the program quickly devolved into a racist witch-hunt that overwhelmingly targeted academics of Chinese descent for administrative errors on grant applications, not spying.

The initiative was a legal disaster for the government, producing a series of humiliating acquittals and dropped cases:

? **Anming Hu** of the University of Tennessee was acquitted of fraud after a trial revealed that an FBI agent had knowingly used false information to build the case and had attempted to coerce Hu into spying for the US.

? **Gang Chen** of MIT had all charges dropped after it was proven that the grant disclosures he had allegedly failed to make were not, in fact, required by the Department of Energy.

? **Xiaoxing Xi** of Temple University, arrested at gunpoint in front of his family, was exonerated after it was proven that the scientific information he shared was not restricted and was part of normal academic collaboration.

The Biden administration formally ended the China Initiative in 2022, acknowledging it "fueled a narrative of intolerance and bias." The underlying policy continued, however, and the offensive against China was escalated through the CHIPS Act and the AUKUS military pact between the US, the UK and Australia. The tactics merely shifted to less visible but equally damaging visa restrictions and systematic border harassment of Chinese scholars.

The second Trump administration is now reviving the most overt forms of persecution, with bipartisan support for a new "CCP Initiative." Right-wing congressmen like Michigan's John Moolenaar and Tim Walberg are leading a McCarthyite crusade, sending threatening letters to universities and forcing them to sever long-standing ties with Chinese institutions. Terrified of losing federal funding, university administrations across the country, including at the University of Michigan, have capitulated.

This bipartisan campaign has had a devastating impact on science. A 2023 study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* titled "Caught in the Crossfire" documented the climate of fear created by the state. It found that 72 percent of scientists of Chinese descent feel unsafe in the US, and 61 percent have considered leaving the country.

This has triggered a "reverse brain drain" that has accelerated since 2018, with thousands of top scientists leaving the US and returning to China.

In its drive to cripple a rival, US imperialism is inflicting a massive wound on its own scientific and technological base, a profound expression of the irrationality of a ruling class in historical decline.

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